BETTY GORDON *in the* LAND OF OIL

By the Author of
RUTH FIELDING

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CLOVER TOOK THE BIT BETWEEN HER TEETH AND BEGAN TO RUN.

"Betty Gordon in the Land of Oil."

Betty Gordon in the Land of Oil

OR

The Farm That Was Worth a Fortune

BY

ALICE B. EMERSON

AUTHOR OF "BETTY GORDON AT BRAMBLE FARM," "BETTY GORDON IN WASHINGTON," "THE RUTH FIELDING SERIES," ETC.

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RUTH FIELDING AT THE WAR FRONT
RUTH FIELDING HOMEWARD BOUND
RUTH FIELDING DOWN EAST

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BETTY GORDON IN THE LAND OF OIL

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BETTY GORDON IN THE LAND OF OIL

CHAPTER I

BREAKFAST EN ROUTE

"THERE, Bob, did you see that? Oh, we've passed it, and you were looking the other way. It was a cowboy. At least he looked just like the pictures. And he was waving at the train."

Betty Gordon, breakfasting in the dining-car of the Western Limited, smiled happily at Bob Henderson, seated on the opposite side of the table. This was her first long train trip, and she meant to enjoy every angle of it.

"I wonder what kind of cowboy you'd make, Bob?" Betty speculated, studying the frank, boyish face of her companion. "You'd have to be taller, I think."

"But not much thinner," observed Bob cheerfully. "Skinny cowboys are always in demand, Betty. They do more work. Well, what do you know about that!" He broke off his speech abruptly and stared at the table directly behind Betty.

Betty paid little attention to his silence. She was busy with her own thoughts, and now, pouring golden cream into her coffee, voiced one of them.

"I'm glad we're going to Oklahoma," she announced. "I think it is heaps more fun to stop before you get to the other side of the continent. I want to see what is in the middle. The Arnolds, you know, went direct to California, and now they'll probably never know what kind of country takes up the space between Pineville and Los Angeles. Of course they saw some of it from the train, but that isn't like getting off and *staying*. Is it, Bob?"

"I suppose not," agreed Bob absently. "Betty Gordon," he added with a change of tone, "is that coffee you're drinking?"

Betty nodded guiltily.

"When I'm traveling," she explained in her defense, "I don't see why I can't drink coffee for breakfast. And when I'm visiting—that's the only two times I take it, Bob."

Bob had been minded to read her a lecture on the evils of coffee drinking for young people, but his gaze wandered again to the table behind Betty, and his scientific protest remained unspoken.

"For goodness sake, Bob," complained Betty, "what can you be staring at?"

"Don't turn around," cautioned Bob in a low tone. "When we go back to our car I'll tell you all about it."

Bob gave his attention more to his breakfast after this, and seemed anxious to keep Betty from asking any more questions. He noticed a package of flat envelopes lying under her purse and asked if she had letters she wished mailed.

"Those aren't letters," answered Betty, taking them out and spreading them on the cloth for him to see. "They're flower seeds, Bob. Hardy flowers."

"You haven't planned your garden yet, have you?" cried the astonished boy. "When you haven't the first idea of the kind of place you're going to live in? Your uncle wrote, you know, that living in Flame City was so simplified people didn't take time to look around for rooms or a house—they took whatever they could get, sure that that was all there was. How do you know you'll have a place to plant a garden?"

Betty buttered another roll.

"I'm not planning for a garden," she said mildly. "You're going to help me plant these seeds, and we're going to do it right after breakfact—just as soon as we can get out on the observation platform."

Bob stared in bewilderment.

"I read a story once," said Betty with seem-

ing irrelevance. "It was about some woman who traveled through a barren country, mile after mile. She was on an accommodation train, too, or perhaps it was before they had good railroad service. And every so often her fellow-passengers saw that she threw something out of the window. They couldn't see what it was, and she never told them. But the next year, when some of these same passengers made that trip again, the train rolled through acres and acres of the most gorgeous red poppies. The woman had been scattering the seed. She said, whether she ever rode over that ground again or not, she was sure some of the seeds would sprout and make the waste places beautiful for travelers."

"I should think it would take a lot of seed," said the practical Bob, his eyes following two men who were leaving the dining-car. "Did you get poppies, too?"

"Yellow and red ones," declared Betty. "The dealer said they were very hardy, and, anyway, I do want to try, Bob. We've been through such miles of prairie, and it's so deadly monotonous. Even if none of my seed grows near the railroad, the wind may carry some off to some lonely farm home and then they'll give the farmer's wife a gay surprise. Let's fling the seed from the observation car, shall we?"

"All right; though I must say I don't think a

bit of it will grow," said Bob. "But first, come back into our coach with me; I want to tell you about those two men who sat back of you."

"Is that what you were staring about?" demanded Betty, as they found their seats and Bob picked up his camera preparatory to putting in a new roll of film. "I wondered why you persisted in looking over my shoulder so often."

Bob Henderson's boyish face sobered and unconsciously his chin hardened a little, a sure sign that he was a bit worried.

"I don't know whether you noticed them or not," he began. "They went out of the diner a few minutes ahead of us. One is tall with gray hair and wears glasses, and the other is thin, too, but short and has very dark eyes. No glasses. They're both dressed in gray—hats, suits, socks, ties—everything."

"No, I didn't notice them," said Betty dryly. "But you seem to have done so."

"I couldn't help hearing what they said," explained Bob. "I was up early this morning, trying to read, and they were talking in their berths. And when I was getting my shoes shined before breakfast, they were awaiting their turn, and they kept it right up. I suppose because I'm only a boy they think it isn't worth while to be careful."

"But what have they done?" urged Betty impatiently.

"I don't know what they've done," admitted Bob. "I'll tell you what I think, though. I think they're a pair of sharpers, and out to take any money they can find that doesn't have to be earned."

"Why, Bob Henderson, how you do talk!" Betty reproached him reprovingly. "Do you mean to say they would rob anybody?"

"Well, probably not through a picked lock, or a window in the dead of night," answered Bob. "But taking money that isn't rightfully yours can not be called by a very pleasant name, you know. Mind you, I don't say these men are dishonest, but judging from what I overheard they lack only the opportunity.

"They're going to Oklahoma, too, and that's what interested me when I first heard them," he went on. "The name attracted my attention, and then the older one went on to talk about their chances of getting the best of some one in the oil fields.

" 'The way to work it,' he said, 'is to get hold of a woman farm-owner; some one who hasn't any men folks to advise her or meddle with her property. Ten to one she won't have heard of the oil boom, or if she has, it's easy enough to pose as a government expert and tell her her

land is worthless for oil. We'll offer her a good price for it for straight farming, and we'll have the old lady grateful to us the rest of her life.'

"If that doesn't sound like the scheming of a couple of rascals, I miss my guess," concluded Bob. "You see the trick, don't you, Betty? They'll take care to find a farm that's right in the oil section, and then they'll bully and persuade some timid old woman into selling her farm to them for a fraction of its worth."

"Can't you expose 'em?" said Betty vigorously. "Tell the oil men about them! I guess there must be people who would know how to keep such men from doing business. What are you going to do about it, Bob?"

The boy looked at her in admiration.

"You believe in action, don't you?" he returned. "You see, we can't really do anything yet, because, so far as we know, the men have merely talked their scheme over. If people were arrested for merely plotting, the world might be saved a lot of trouble, but free speech would be a thing of the past. As long as they only talk, Betty, we can't do a thing."

"Here those men come now, down the aisle," whispered Betty excitedly. "Don't look up—pretend to be fixing the camera."

Bob obediently fumbled with the box, while Betty gazed detachedly across the aisle. The

two men glanced casually at them as they passed, opened the door of the car, and went on into the next coach.

"They're going to the smoker," guessed Bob, correctly as it proved. "I'm going to follow them, Betty, and see if I can hear any more. Perhaps there will be something definite to report to the proper authorities. From what Mr. Littell told us, the oil-field promoters would like all the crooks rounded up. They're the ones that hurt the name of reputable oil stocks. You don't care if I go, do you?"

"I did want you to help me scatter seeds," confessed Betty candidly. "However, go ahead, and I'll do it myself. Lend me the camera, and I'll take my sweater and stay out a while. If I'm not here when you come back, look for me out on the observation platform."

Bob hurried after the two possible sharpers, and Betty went through the train till she came to the last platform, railed in and offering the comforts of a porch to those passengers who did not mind the breeze. This morning it was deserted, and Betty was glad, for she wanted a little time to herself.

CHAPTER II

THINKING BACKWARD

BETTY leaned over the rail, flinging the contents of the seed packets into the air and breathing a little prayer that the wind might carry them far and that none might "fall on stony ground."

"If I never see the flowers, some one else may," she thought. "I remember that old lady who lived in Pineville, poor blind Mrs. Tompkins. She was always telling about the pear orchard she and her husband planted the first year of their married life out in Ohio. Then they moved East, and she never saw the trees. 'But somebody has been eating the pears these twenty years,' she used to say. I hope my flowers grow for some one to see."

When she had tossed all the seeds away, Betty snuggled into one of the comfortable reed chairs and gave herself up to her own thoughts. Since leaving Washington, the novelty and excitement of the trip had thoroughly occupied her mind, and there had been little time for retrospection.

This bright morning, as the prairie land slipped past the train, Betty Gordon's mind swiftly re-

viewed the incidents of the last few months and marveled at the changes brought about in a comparatively short time. She was an orphan, this dark-eyed girl of thirteen, and, having lost her mother two years after her father's death, had turned to her only remaining relative, an uncle, Richard Gordon. How he came to her in the little town of Pineville, her mother's girlhood home, and arranged to send her to spend the summer on a farm with an old school friend of his has been told in the first volume of this series, entitled "Betty Gordon at Bramble Farm; or, The Mystery of a Nobody." At Bramble Farm Betty had met Bob Henderson, a lad a year or so older than herself and a ward from the county poorhouse. The girl and boy had become fast friends, and when Bob learned enough of his mother's family to make him want to know all and in pursuit of that knowledge had fled to Washington, it seemed providential that Betty's uncle should also be in the capital so that she, too, might journey there.

That had been her first "real traveling," mused Betty, recalling her eagerness to discover new worlds. Bob had been the first to leave the farm, and Betty had made the trip to Washington alone. This morning she vividly remembered every detail of the day-long journey and especially of the warm reception that awaited her at

the Union Station. This has been described in the second book of this series, entitled "Betty Gordon in Washington; or, Strange Adventures in a Great City." If Betty should live to be an old lady she would probably never cease to recall the peculiar circumstances under which she made friends with the three Littell girls and their cousin from Vermont and came to spend several delightful weeks at the hospitable mansion of Fairfields. The Littell family had grown to be very fond of Betty and of Bob, whose fortunes seemed to be inextricably mixed up with hers, and when the time came for them to leave for Oklahoma, fairly showered them with gifts.

No sooner did word reach Betty that her uncle awaited her in the oil regions than Bob announced that he was going West, too. He had succeeded in getting trace of two sisters of his mother, and presumably they lived somewhere in the section where Betty's uncle was stationed.

"I'll never forget how lovely the Littells were to us," thought Betty, a mist in her eyes blurring the sage brush. "Wasn't Bob surprised when Mr. Littell gave him that camera? And Mrs. Littell must have known he didn't have a nice bag, because she gave him that beauty all fitted with ebony toilet articles. And the girls clubbed together and gave each of us a signet ring—that was dear of them. I thought they had done every-

thing for me friends could, keeping me there so long and entertaining me as though they had invited me as a special guest; so when Mr. and Mrs. Littell gave me that string of gold beads I was just about speechless. There never were such people! Heigho! Four months ago I was living in a little village, discontented because Uncle Dick wouldn't take me with him. And now I've made lots of new friends, seen Washington, and am speeding toward the wild and woolly West. I guess it never pays to complain."

With this philosophical conclusion, Betty pulled a letter from her pocket and fell to reading it. Bobby Littell had written a letter for each day of the journey and Betty had derived genuine pleasure from these gay notes so like the cheerful, sunny Roberta herself. This morning's letter was taken up with school plans for the fall, and the writer expressed a wish that Betty might go with them to boarding school.

"Libbie thinks perhaps her mother will send her, and just think what fun we could have," wrote Bobby, referring to the Vermont cousin.

Betty dismissed the school question lightly from her mind. She would certainly enjoy going to school with the Littell girls, and boarding school was one of her day-dreams, as it is of most girls her age. After she had seen her uncle and spent some time with him—he was very

dear to her, was this Uncle Dick—she thought she might be ready to go back East and take up her education where it had been dropped somewhat unceremoniously. But there was the subject of the probable cost—something that never bothered the Littell girls. Betty knew nothing of her uncle's finances, beyond the fact that he had been very generous with her, sending her checks frequently and never stinting her by word or suggestion. Still, boarding school, especially a school selected by the Littells, would undoubtedly be expensive. Betty wisely decided to let the matter drop for the time being.

Sage brush and prairie was now left behind, and the train was rattling through a heavy forest. Betty was glad that the rather nippy breeze had apparently kept every one else indoors, or else the monotony of a long train journey. The platform continued to be deserted, and, wondering what delayed Bob, she took up the camera to try again for a picture of the receding track. She and Bob had used up perhaps half a dozen films on this one subject, and the gleaming point where the rails came together in the distance had an inexhaustible fascination for the girl.

"How it does blow!" she gasped. "I remember now when we stopped at that water-station Bob spoke of—I didn't notice it at the time, I was so busy thinking, but the breeze didn't die

down with the motion of the train. I shouldn't wonder if there was a strong wind to-day."

As a matter of fact, there was a gale, but Betty, accustomed to the wind from the back platform of a train in motion, thought that it could be nothing unusual. To be sure, the branches of the tall trees were crashing about and the sky over the cleared space on each side of the tracks was gray and ominous (the sun had disappeared as Betty mused) but the girl, comfortable in sweater and small, close hat, paid slight attention to these signs.

"I can't see what is keeping Bob," she repeated, putting the camera down. "Maybe I'd better go back into the car. How those trees do swish about! I don't believe if I shouted, I'd be heard above the noise of the wind and the train."

This was an alluring thought, and Betty acted upon it, cautiously at first, and then, gaining confidence, more freely. It is exhilarating to contend with the rush of the wind, to pitch one's voice against a torrent of sound, and Betty stood at the rail singing as loudly as she could, her tones lost completely in a grander chorus. Her cheeks crimsoned, and she fairly shouted, feeling to her finger tips the joy and excitement of the powerful forces with which she competed—those of old nature and man's invention, the

thing of smoke and fire and speed we call a train.

Suddenly the brakes went down, there was an uneasy screeching as they gripped the wheels, and the long train jarred to a standstill.

"How funny!" puzzled Betty. "There's no station. We're right out in the woods. Oh, I can hear the wind now—how it does howl!"

She picked up her belongings and made her way back to the car. As she passed through the coaches every one was asking the cause of the stop, and an immigrant woman caught hold of Betty as she went through a day coach.

"Is it wrong?" she asked nervously, and in halting English. "Must we get off here?"

"I don't know what the matter is," answered Betty, thankful that she was asked nothing more difficult. "But whatever happens, don't get off; this isn't a station, it is right in the woods. If you get off and lose some of your children, you'll never get them together again and the train will go off and leave you. Don't get off until the conductor tells you to."

The woman sank back in her seat and called her children around her, evidently resolved to follow this advice to the last letter.

"She looks as if an earthquake wouldn't blow her from her seat," thought Betty, proceeding to her own car. "Well, at that, it's safer for her than trying to find out what the matter is and

not being able to find her way aboard again. I remember the conductor told Bob and me these poor immigrants have such trouble traveling. It must be awful to make your way in a strange country where you can not understand what people say to you."

No Bob was to be seen when Betty reached her seat, but excited passengers were apparently trying to fall head-first from the car windows.

"I think we've run over some one," announced a fussy little man with a monocle and a flower in his buttonhole.

With a warning toot of the whistle, the train began to move slowly forward. It went a few feet, apparently hit something solid, and stopped with a violent jar.

"Oh, my goodness!" wailed a woman who was clearly the wife of the fussy little man. "Won't some one please go and find out what the matter is?"

Betty looked toward the car door and saw Bob pushing his way toward her.

CHAPTER III

WHAT BOB HEARD

WHEN Bob entered the smoking-car he saw the two men he had pointed out to Betty seated near the door at the further end of the car. The boy wondered for the first time what he could do that would offer an excuse for his presence in the car, for of course he had never smoked. However, walking slowly down the aisle he saw several men deep in their newspapers and not even pretending to smoke. No one paid the slightest attention to him. Bob took the seat directly behind the two men in gray, and, pulling a Chicago paper from his pocket, bought that morning on the train, buried himself behind it.

The noise made by the train had evidently lulled caution, or else the suspected sharpers did not care if their plans were overheard. Their two heads were very close together, and they were talking earnestly, their harsh voices clearly audible to any one who sat behind them.

"I tell you, Blosser," the older man was saying as Bob unfolded his paper, "it's the niftiest little proposition I ever saw mapped out. We

can't fail. Best of all, it's within the law—I've been reading up on the Oklahoma statutes. There's been a lot of new legislation rushed through since the oil boom struck the State, and we can't get into trouble. What do you say?"

The man called Blosser flipped his cigar ash into the aisle.

"I don't like giving a lease," he objected. "You know as well as I do, Jack, that putting anything down in black and white is bound to be risky. That's what did for Spellman. He had more brains than the average trader, and what happened? He's serving seven years in an Ohio prison."

Bob was apparently intensely interested in an advertisement of a new collar button.

"Spellman was careless," said the gray-haired man impatiently. "In this case we simply have to give a lease. The man's been coached, and he won't turn over his land without something to show for it. I tell you we'll get a lawyer we can control to draw the papers, and they won't bind us, whatever they exact of the other fellow. Don't upset the scheme by one of your obstinate fits."

"Call me stubborn, if you like," said Blosser. "For my part, I think you're crazy to consider any kind of papers. A mule-headed farmer, armed with a lease, can put us both out of business if the thing's managed right; and trust some

smart lawyer to be on hand to give advice at an unlucky moment. Hello!" he broke off suddenly, "isn't that Dan Carson over there on the other side, smoking a cigarette?"

Bob peeped over his paper and saw the dark-eyed man spring from his seat and hurry across the aisle where a large, fat, jovial-looking individual was puffing contentedly on a cigarette.

"Cal Blosser!" boomed the big man in a voice heard over the car. "Well, well, if this isn't like old times! Glad to see you, glad to see you. What's that? Jack Fluss with you? Lead me to the boy, bless his old heart!"

The two came back to the seat ahead of Bob, and there was a great handshaking, much slapping on the back, and a general chorus of, "Well, you're looking great," and "How's the world been treating you?" before the man called Dan Carson tipped over the seat ahead and sat down facing the two gray-clad men.

"I'm glad to see you for more reasons than one," said Blosser, passing around fresh cigars. "Who's behind us, Dan?" He lowered his voice. "Only a kid? Oh, all right. Well, Jack here, has been working on an oil scheme for the last two weeks, and this morning he comes out with the bright idea of giving some desert farmer a lease for his property. Can you get over that?"

Three spirals of tobacco smoke curled above

the seats, and when Bob lifted his gaze from the paper he could see the round, good-natured face of the fat man beaming through the gray veil.

"What you want to go to that trouble for?" he drawled, after a pause. Clearly he was never hurried into an answer. "Seems to me, Jack, this is a case where the youngster shows good judgment. Where you fixing to operate?"

"Oklahoma," was the comprehensive answer. "Oil's the thing to-day. There's more money being made in the fields over night than we used to think was in the United States mint."

"Oil's good," said the fat man judicially. "But why the lease? Plenty of farms still owned by widows or old maids, and they'll fairly throw the land at you if you handle 'em right."

There was an exclamation from the dark-eyed man.

"Just what I was telling Jack this morning," he chortled. "Buy a farm, for farming purposes only, from some old lady. Pay her a good price, but get your land in the oil section. Old lady happy, we strike oil, sell out to big company, everybody happy. Simple, after all. Good schemes always are."

Jack Fluss grunted derisively.

"Lovely schemes, yours always are," he commented sarcastically. "Only thing missing from the scenario, as stated, is the farm. Where are

you going to pick up an oil farm for a song? Old maids are sure to have a nephew or something hanging round to keep 'em posted."

"Now you mention it——" Carson fumbled in his pocket. "Now you mention it, boys, I believe I've got the very place for you. I've been prospecting around quite a bit in Oklahoma, and this summer I ran across a farm that for location can't be beat. Right in the heart of the oil section. Like this——"

He took an envelope from his pocket and, resting it on his knee, began to draw a rough diagram. The three heads bent close together and the busy tongues were silent save for a muttered question or a word or two of explanation.

Bob began to think that he had heard all he was to hear, and certainly he was no longer in doubt as to the character of the men he had followed. He had decided to go back to Betty when the older of the two gray-suited men, leaning back and taking off his glasses to polish them, addressed a question to Carson.

"Widow own this place?" he asked casually.

"No, couple of old maids," was the answer. "Last of their line, and all that. The neighbors know it as the Saunders place, but I didn't rightly get whether that was the name of the old ladies or not."

The Saunders place!

Bob sat up with a jerk, and then, remembering, sank back and turned a page, though his hands shook with excitement.

"Faith Henderson, born a Saunders—" The words of the old bookshop man, Lockwood Hale, who had told Bob about his mother's people, came back to him.

"I do believe it is the very same place," he said to himself. "There couldn't be two farms in the oil section owned by different families of the name of Saunders. If it is the right farm, and they're my aunts, perhaps Betty's uncle will know where it is."

He strained his ears, hoping to gather more information, but having heard of this desirable farm, Fluss and Blosser were apparently unwilling to discuss it further. In reality, had Bob only known, they were mulling the situation over in their respective minds, and Carson knew they were. That night, over a game of cards, a finished proposition would doubtless be perfected, and a partnership formed.

"What about you?" Fluss did say.

"Who? Me?" asked Carson inelegantly. "Oh, I'm sorry, but I can't go in with you. I'm going right on through to the coast. Oklahoma isn't healthy for me for a couple of months. All I'll charge you for the information is ten per

cent. royalty, payable when your first well flows. My worst enemy couldn't call me mean."

"Got something to show you, Carson," said the man with eye-glasses. "Come on back into the sleeper and I'll unstrap the suit-case."

The three rose, tossed away their cigar butts, and went up the aisle. Bob waited till they had gone into the next car, intending then to go back to Betty. His intentions were frustrated by a lanky individual who dropped into the seat beside him.

"Smoke?" he said in friendly fashion, offering Bob a cigarette. "No? Well, that's right. I didn't smoke at your age, either. Fact is, I was most twenty-three before I knew how tobacco tasted. Slick-looking posters went up the aisle just now, what?"

Bob admitted that there was something peculiar about them.

"Sharpers, if I ever saw any," said the lanky one. "We're overrun with 'em. They come out from the East, and because they can dress and know how to sling language—— Say," he suddenly became serious, "you'd be surprised the way the girls fall for 'em. My girl thinks if a man's clothes are all right he must be a Wall Street magnate, and the rest of the girls are just like her. They're the men that give the oil fields a shady side."

In spite of his roughness, Bob liked the freckle-faced person, and he had proved that he was far from stupid.

"You've evidently seen tricky oil men," he said guardedly. "Do you work in the oil fields? I'm going to Oklahoma."

"Me for Texas," announced his companion. "I change at the next junction. No, the nearest I ever come to working in the oil fields is filling tanks for the cars in my father's garage. But o' course I know oil—the streets run with it down our way, and they use it to flush the irrigation system. And I've seen some of the raw deals these sharpers put through—doing widows and orphans out of their land. Makes you have a mighty small opinion of the law, I declare it does."

As he spoke the train slowed up, then stopped.

"No station," puzzled the Texan. "Let's go and find out the trouble."

He started for the door, and then the train started, bumped, and came to a standstill again.

"You go ahead!" shouted Bob. "I have to go back and see that my friend is all right."

CHAPTER IV

BLOCKED TRAFFIC

ALL was uproar and confusion in the coaches through which Bob had to pass to reach the car where he knew Betty was. Distracted mothers with frightened, crying children charged up and down the aisles, excited men ran through, and the wildest guesses flew about. The concensus of opinion was that they had hit something!

"Oh, Bob!" Betty greeted him with evident relief when he at last reached her. "What has happened? Is any one hurt? Will another train come up behind us and run into us?"

This last was a cheerful topic broached by the fussy little man whose capacity for going ahead and meeting trouble was boundless.

"Of course not!" Bob's scorn was more reassuring than the gentlest answer. "As soon as a train stops they set signals to warn traffic. What a horrible racket every one is making! They're all screeching at once. Get your hat, Betty, and we'll go and find out something definite. I don't know any more than you do, but I can't stand this noise."

Betty was glad to get away from the babble of sound, and they went down the first set of steps and joined the procession that was picking its way over the ties toward the engine.

"Express due in three minutes," said a brakeman warningly, hurrying past them. "Stand well back from the tracks."

He went on, cautioning every one he passed, and a majority of the passengers swerved over to the wide cinder path on the other side of the second track. A few persisted in walking the ties.

"Here she comes! Look out!" Bob shouted, as a trail of smoke became visible far up the track.

He had insisted that Betty stand well away from the track, and now the few persistent ones who had remained on the cleared track scrambled madly to reach safety. A woman who walked with a cane, and who had overridden her young-woman attendant's advice that she stay in the coach until news of the accident, whatever it was, could be brought to her, was almost paralyzed with nervous fright. Bob went to her distressed attendant's aid, and between them they half-carried, half-dragged the stubborn old person from the shining rails.

"Toto!" she gasped.

Bob stared, but Betty's quick eye had seen.

There, in the middle of the track, sat a fluffy little dog, its eyes so thickly screened with hair that it is doubtful if it could see three inches before its shining black nose. This was Toto, and the rush of events had completely bewildered him. The dog was accustomed to being held on its mistress' lap or carried about in a covered basket, but she had decided that a short walk would give the little beast needed exercise, and it had pantingly tagged along after her, obedient, as usual, to her whims. Now she had suddenly disappeared. Well, Toto must sit down and wait for her to come back. Perhaps she might miss him and come after him right away.

The thundering noise of the train was clearly audible when Betty swooped down on the patient Toto, grabbed him by his fluffy neck, and sprang back. Bob, turning from his charge, had caught a glimpse of the girl as she dashed toward something on the track, and now as she jumped he grasped her arm and pulled her toward him. He succeeded in dragging her back several rods, but they both stumbled and fell. There was a yelp of protest from Toto, drowned in the mighty shriek and roar of the train. The great Eastern Limited swept past them, rocking the ground, sending out a cloud of black smoke shot with sparks, and letting fall a rain of gritty cinders.

"Don't you ever let me catch you doing any-

thing like that again!" scolded Bob, getting to his feet and helping Betty up. "Of all the foolish acts! Why, you would have been struck if you'd made a misstep. What possessed you, Betty?"

"Toto," answered Betty, dimpling, brushing the dirt from her skirts and daintily shaking out the fluffy dog. "See what a darling he is, Bob. Do you suppose I could let a train run over him?"

Bob admitted, grudgingly, for he was still nervous and shaken, that Toto was a "cute mutt," and then, when they had restored him to his grateful mistress, they went on to their goal. No one had noticed Betty's narrow escape, for all had been concerned with their own safety. Betty herself was inclined to minimize the danger, but Bob knew that she might easily have been drawn under the wheels by the suction, if not actually overtaken on the track.

There was a crowd about the engine, and the grimy-faced engineer leaned from his cab, inspecting them impassively. His general attitude was one of boredom, tinged with disgust.

"Guess they've all been telling him what to do," whispered Bob, who, while only a lad, had a trick of correctly estimating situations.

Pressing their way close in, he and Betty were at last able to see what had stopped the train.

The high wind, which was still blowing with undiminished force, had blown down a huge tree. It lay directly across the track, and barely missed the east-bound rails.

"Another foot, and she'd have tied up traffic both ways," said the brakeman who had warned the passengers of the approach of the express. "What you going to do, Jim?"

The engineer sighed heavily.

"Got to wait till it's sawed in pieces small enough for a gang to handle," he answered. "We've sent to Tippewa for a cross-cut saw. Take us from now till the first o' the month to saw that trunk with the emergency saws."

"Where's Tippewa?" called out an inquisitive passenger. "Any souvenirs there?"

"Sure. Indian baskets and that kind of truck," volunteered the young brakeman affably, as the engineer did not deign to answer. " 'Bout a mile, maybe a mile and a half, straight up the track. We don't stop there. You'll have plenty of time, won't he, Jim?"

"We'll be here a matter of three hours or more," admitted the engineer.

"Let's walk to the town, Betty," suggested Bob. "We don't want to hang around here for three hours. All this country looks alike."

Apparently half the passengers had decided that a trip to the town promised a break in the

monotony of a long train trip, and the track resembled the main street of Pineville on a holiday. Every one walked on the track occupied by the stalled train, and so felt secure.

"Bob," whispered Betty presently, "look. Aren't those the two men you followed this morning? Just ahead of us—see the gray suits? And did you hear anything to report?"

"Why, I haven't told you, have I?" said Bob contritely. "The train stopping put it out of my mind. What do you think, Betty, they were talking about the Saunders place! Can you imagine that?"

"The Saunders place?" echoed Betty, stopping short. "Why, Bob, do you suppose—do you think——"

"Sure! It must be the farm my aunts live on," nodded Bob. "Saunders isn't such a common name, you know. Besides, the one they call Dan Carson—he isn't with them, guess he is too fat to enjoy walking—said it was owned by a couple of old maids. Oh, it is the right place, I'm sure of it. And I count on your Uncle Dick's knowing where it is, since they spoke of the farm being in the heart of the oil section."

"Where do you suppose they're going now?" speculated Betty.

"Oh, I judge they want to see the sights, same as we do," replied Bob carelessly. "Perhaps

they count on fleecing some confiding Tippewa citizen out of his hard-earned wealth. They can't do much in three hours, though, and I think they're booked to go right on through to Oklahoma. Of course I don't know how crooks work their schemes, but it seems to me if you want to make money, honestly or dishonestly, in oil, you go where oil is."

Betty Gordon was not given to long speeches, but when she did speak it was usually to the point.

"I don't think they're going back to the train," she announced quietly. "They're carrying their suitcases."

"Well, what do you know about that!" Bob addressed a telegraph pole. "Here I am making wild guesses, and she takes one look at the men themselves and tells their plans. Do I need glasses? I begin to think I do."

"I don't guess their plans," protested Betty. "Anyway, perhaps they were afraid to leave their bags in the car."

"No, it looks very much to me as though they had said farewell to the Western Limited," said Bob. "They wouldn't carry those heavy cases a mile unless they meant to leave for good. Let's keep an eye on them, because if they are going to 'work' the Saunders place, I'd like to see how they intend to go about it."

For some time the boy and girl tramped in

silence, keeping Blosser and Fluss in view. A large billboard, blown flat, was the first sign that they were approaching Tippewa.

"I hope there is a soda fountain," said Betty thirstily. "The wind's worse now we're out of the woods, isn't it? Do you suppose those sharpers think they can get another train from here?"

"Tippewa doesn't look like a town with many trains," opined Bob. "I confess I don't see what they expect to do, or where they can go. Here comes an automobile, though. Can't be such an out-of-date town after all."

The automobile was driven by a man in blue-striped overalls, and, to the surprise of Bob and Betty, Blosser and Fluss hailed him from the road. There was a minute's parley, the suitcases were tossed in, and the two men followed. The automobile turned sharply and went back along the route it had just come over.

CHAPTER V

BETWEEN TRAINS

Bob looked at Betty, and Betty stared at Bob.

"What do you know about that!" gasped the boy. "They couldn't have arranged for the car to meet them, because the tree blowing down was an accident pure and simple. Where can they be going?"

"I don't know," said Betty practically. "But here's a drug store and I must have something cold to drink. My throat feels dried with dust. Why don't you ask the drug clerk whose car that was?"

Bob acted upon this excellent suggestion, and while Betty was recovering from her disappointment in finding no ice-cream for sale and doing her best to quench her thirst with a bottle of lukewarm lemon soda, Bob interviewed the grizzled proprietor of the store.

"A small car painted a dull red you say?" this individual repeated Bob's question. "Must 'a' been Fred Griggs. He hires out whenever he can get anybody to tote round."

"But where does anybody go?" asked Bob,

feeling that his query was not couched in the most complimentary terms, but unable to amend it quickly.

The drug store owner was not critical.

"Oh, folks go over to Xville," he said indifferently. "That's a new town fifteen miles back. They say oil was discovered there some twenty years ago, but others claim nothing but water ever flowed. That's how it came to be called Xville. I guess if the truth was known, the wells wasn't oil—we're a little out of the belt here."

That was as far as Bob was able to follow the sharpers. He had no way of knowing certainly whether they had gone to Xville, or whether they had hired the car to take them to some other place nearer or further on. Betty finished her soda and they strolled about the single street for a half hour, buying three collapsible Indian baskets for the Littell girls. since they would easily pack into Betty's bag.

They reached the train to find the last section of the big tree being lifted from the track, and half an hour later, all passengers aboard, the train resumed its journey. Bob and Betty had eaten lunch in the town, and they spent the afternoon on the observation platform, Betty tatting and Bob trying to write a letter to Mr. Littell. They were glad to have their berths made up early that night, for both planned to be up at

six o'clock the next morning when the train, the conductor told them, crossed the line into Oklahoma. Betty cherished an idea that the State in which she was so much interested would be "different" in some way from the country through which they had been passing.

The good-natured conductor was on hand the next morning to point out to them the State line, and Betty, under his direct challenge, had to admit that she could see nothing distinguishing about the scenery.

"Wait till you see the oil wells," said the conductor cheerfully. "You'll know you're in Oklahoma then, little lady."

Bob and Betty were to change at Chassada to make connections for Flame City, where Betty's Uncle Dick was stationed, and soon after breakfast the brakeman called the name of the station and they descended from the train. As it rolled on they both were conscious of a momentary feeling of loneliness, for in the long journey from Washington they had grown accustomed to their comfortable quarters and to the kindly train crew.

They had an hour to wait in Chassada, and Bob suggested that they leave their bags at the station and walk around the town.

"I believe they have oil wells near here," he said. "Some one on the train—oh, I know who

it was, that lanky chap from Texas—was telling me that from the outskirts of the place you can see oil wells. Or perhaps we can get a bus to take us out to the fields and bring us back."

"Oh, no," protested Betty. "I know Uncle Dick is counting on showing us the wells and explaining them to us, Bob. Don't let us bother about going up close to a well—we can see enough from the town limits. Look, there's one now!"

They had reached the edge of the narrow, straggling group of streets that was all of Chassada, and now Betty pointed toward the west where tall iron framework rose in the air. There were six of these structures, and, even at that distance, the boy and girl could see men working busily about at the base of the frames.

"Looks just like the postcards your uncle sent, doesn't it?" said Bob delightedly. "Gee! I'd like to see just how they drive them. Well, I suppose before we're a week older we'll know how to drive a well and what to do with the oil when it finally flows. You'll be talking oil as madly as any of them then, Betty."

"I suppose I shall," admitted Betty. "Do you know, I'm hungry. I wonder if there is any place we can eat?"

"Must be," said the optimistic Bob. "Come on, we'll go up this street. Perhaps there will be

some kind of a restaurant. Never heard of a town without a place to eat."

But Bob began to think presently that perhaps Chassada differed in more ways than one from the towns to which he was accustomed. In the first place, though every one seemed to have plenty of money—there was a neat and attractive jewelry store conspicuous between a barber shop and a grain store—no one seemed to have to work. The streets were unpaved, the sidewalks of rough boards in many places, in others no walks at all were attempted. Many of the buildings were mere shacks incongruously painted in brilliant colors, and there were more dogs than were ever before gathered into one place. Of that Bob was sure.

"Do you suppose they've all made fortunes in oil?" Betty ventured, scanning the groups of men and boys that filled every doorway and lounged at the corners. "No one is working, Bob. Who runs the wells?"

"Different shifts, I suppose," answered Bob. "I declare, Betty, I'm not so sure that you'll get anything to eat after all. We'll go back to the station; they may have sandwiches or cake or something like that on sale there."

They turned down another street that led to the station, Bob in the lead. He heard a little

cry from Betty, and turned to find that she had disappeared.

"The lady fell down that hole!" shouted a man, hurrying across the street. "There go the barrels! I told Zinker he ought to have braced that dirt!"

Bob, still not understanding, saw four large barrels that had stood on the sidewalk slowly topple over the side of an excavation and roll out of sight.

"She went in, too," cried the man, scrambling over the edge. "Are you hurt, lady?" he called.

"Betty!" shouted Bob. "Betty, are you hurt?" he took a flying leap to the edge of the hole, and, having miscalculated the distance, slid over after the barrels.

Over and over he rolled, bringing up breathless against something soft.

"I knew you'd come to get me," giggled Betty, "but you needn't have hurried. Are there any more barrels coming?"

Bob was immensely relieved to find that she was unhurt. The barrels had luckily been empty and had rolled over and into her harmlessly.

"Well, looks like you're all right," grinned the Chassada citizen who had followed Bob more leisurely. "Let me help you up this grade. There now, you're fine and dandy, barring a little dirt that will wash off. George Zinker excavated

last winter for a house, and then didn't build. I always told him the walk was shifty. You're strangers in town, aren't you?"

Bob explained that they were only waiting over between trains.

"So you're going to Flame City!" exclaimed their new friend with interest when Bob mentioned their destination. "I hear they've struck it rich in the fields. Buying up everything in sight, they say. We had a well come in last week. Hope you have a place to stay, though; Flame City isn't much more than a store and a post-office."

Betty looked up from rubbing her skirt with her clean handkerchief in an endeavor to remove some of the gravel stains.

"Isn't Flame City larger than Chassada?" she demanded.

"Larger? Why, Chassada is four or five years ahead," explained the Chassada man. "We've got a hotel and three boarding houses, and next month they're fixing to put up a movie theater. Flame City wasn't on the map six months ago. That's why I say I hope you have a place to go —you'll have to rough it, anyway, but accommodations is mighty scarce."

Bob assured him that some one was to meet them, and then asked about a restaurant.

"If you can stand Jake Hill's cooking, turn in

at that white door down the street," was the advice, emphasized by a graphic forefinger. "Lay off the custard pie, 'cause he generally makes it with sour milk. Apple pie is fair, and his doughnuts is good. No thanks at all—glad to accommodate a stranger."

The white door indicated opened into a little low, dark room that smelled of all the pies ever baked and several dishes besides. There were several oilcloth-topped tables scattered about, and one or two patrons were eating. As Bob and Betty entered a great gust of laughter came from a corner table where a group of men were gathered.

"Guess that was good advice about the custard pie," whispered Bob mischievously. "Think you can stand it, Betty?"

"I'm so hungry, I could stand anything," declared Betty with vigor. "I'd like a couple of sandwiches and a glass of milk. I guess you have to go up to that counter and bring your orders back with you—I don't see any waiters."

Bob went up to the counter, and Betty sat down at a vacant table and looked about her.

CHAPTER VI

QUICK ACTION

A DIRTY-FACED clock on the wall told Betty that it was within twenty minutes of the time their train was due. However, they were within sight of the station, so, provided Bob was quickly waited upon, there was no reason to worry about missing the connection.

Bob came back, balancing the sandwiches and milk precariously, and they proceeded to make a hearty lunch, their appetites sharpened by the clear Western air, in a measure compensating for the sawdust bread and the extreme blueness of the milk.

"What are those men laughing about, I wonder," commented Betty idly, as a fresh burst of laughter came from the table in the corner of the room. "What a noise they make! Bob, do I imagine it, or does this bread taste of oil?"

Bob laughed, and glanced over his shoulder to make sure the counter-man could not hear.

"Do you know, I thought that very thing," he confessed. "I wasn't going to mention it, for fear you'd think I was obsessed with the no-

tion of oil. To tell you the truth, Betsey, I think this bread has been near the kerosene oil can, not an oil well."

"Well, we can drink the milk," said Betty philosophically. "It's lucky one sandwich apiece was good. Oh, won't it be fine to get to Flame City and see Uncle Dick! I want to get where we are going, Bob!"

"Sure you do," responded Bob sympathetically, frowning with annoyance as another hoarse burst of laughter came from the corner table. "But I'm afraid Flame City isn't going to be much of a place after all."

"I don't care what kind of place it is," declared Betty firmly. "All I want is to see Uncle Dick and be with him. And I want you to find your aunts. And I'd like to go to school with the Littell girls next fall. And that's all."

Bob smiled, then grew serious.

"I'd like to go to school myself," he said soberly. "Precious little schooling I've had, Betty. I've read all I could, but you can't get anywhere without a good, solid foundation. Well, there'll be time enough to worry about that when school time comes. Just now it is vacation."

"Bob!"—Betty spoke swiftly—"look what those men are doing—teasing that poor Chinaman. How can they be so mean!"

Sure enough, one of the group had slouched forward in his chair, and over his bent shoulders Bob and Betty could see an unhappy Chinaman, clutching his knife and fork tightly and looking with a hunted expression in his slant eyes from one to another of his tormentors. They were evidently harassing him as he ate, for while they watched he took a forkful of the macaroni on the plate before him, and attempted to convey it to his mouth. Instantly one of the men surrounding him struck his arm sharply, and the food flew into the air. Then the crowd laughed uproariously.

"Isn't that perfectly disgusting!" scolded Betty. "How any one can see anything funny in doing that is beyond me. Oh, now look—they've got his slippers."

The unfortunate Chinaman's loose flat slippers hurtled through the air, narrowly missing Betty's head.

"Come on, we're going to get out of this," said Bob determinedly, rising from his seat. "Those chaps once start rough-housing, no telling where they'll bring up. We want to escape the dishes, and besides we haven't any too much time to make our train."

He had paid for their food when he ordered it, so there was nothing to hinder their going out. Bob started for the door, supposing that

Betty was following. But she had seen something that roused her anger afresh.

The poor Celestial was essaying an ineffectual protest at the treatment of his slippers, when a man opposite him reached over and snatched his plate of food.

"China for Chinamen!" he shouted, and with that clapped the plate down on the unfortunate victim's head with so much force that it shivered into several pieces.

Betty could never bear to see a person or an animal unfairly treated, and when, as now, the odds were all against one, she became a veritable little fury. As Bob had once said in a mixture of admiration and despair she wasn't old enough to be afraid of anything or anybody.

"How dare you treat him like that!" she cried, running to the table where the Chinaman sat in a daze. "You ought to be arrested! If you must torment some one, why don't you get somebody who can fight back?"

The men stared at her open-mouthed, bewildered by her unexpected championship of their bait. Then a great, coarse, blowzy-faced man, with enormous grease spots on his clothes, winked at the others.

"My eye, we've a visitor," he drawled. "Sit down, my dear, and John Chinaman shall bring you chop suey for lunch."

Betty drew back as he put out a huge hand.

"You leave her alone!" Bob had come after Betty and stood glaring at the greasy individual. "Anybody who'll treat a foreigner as you've treated that Chinaman isn't fit to speak to a girl!"

A concerted growl greeted this statement.

"If you're looking for a fight," snarled a younger man, "you've struck the right place. Come on, or eat your words."

Now Bob was no coward, but there were five men arrayed against him with a probable sixth in the form of the counter-man who was watching the turn of affairs with great interest from the safe vantage-point of his high counter. It was too much to expect that any men who had dealt with a defenceless and handicapped stranger as these had dealt with the Chinaman would fight fair. Besides, Bob was further hampered by the terrified Betty who clung tightly to his arm and implored him not to fight. It seemed to the lad that the better part of valor would be to take to his heels.

"You cut for the station," he muttered swiftly to Betty. "Get the bags—train's almost due. I'll run up the street and lose 'em somewhere on the way. They won't touch you."

He said this hardly moving his lips, and Betty did not catch every word. But she heard enough

to understand what was expected of her and what Bob planned to do. She loosened her hold on his arm.

Like a shot, Bob made for the door, banged the screen open wide (Betty heard it hit the side of the building), and fled up the straggling, uneven street. Instantly the five toughs were in pursuit.

Betty heard the counter-man calling to her, but she ran from the place and sped toward the station. It was completely deserted, and a written sign proclaimed that the 1:52 train was ten minutes late. Betty judged that the ticket agent, with whom they had left their bags, would return in time to check them out, and she sat down on one of the dusty seats in the fly-specked waiting room to wait for the arrival of Bob.

That young man, as he ran, was racking his brains for a way to elude his pursuers. There were no telegraph poles to climb, and even if there had been, he wanted to get to Betty and the station, not be marooned indefinitely. He glanced back. The hoodlums, for such they were, were gaining on him. They were out of training, but their familiarity with the walks gave them a decided advantage. Bob had to watch out for holes and sidewalk obstructions.

He doubled down a street, and then the solution opened out before him. There was a gro-

cery store, evidently a large shop, for he had noticed the front door on the street where the restaurant was situated. Now he was approaching the rear entrance and a number of packing cases cluttered the walk, and excelsior was lying about. A backward glance showed him that the enemy had not yet rounded the corner. Bob dived into the store.

"Hide me!" he gasped, running plump into a white-haired man in overalls who was whistling "Ben Bolt" and opening cases of canned peaches with pleasant dexterity. "Hide me quick. There's a gang after me—five of 'em!"

"Under the counter, Sonny," said the groceryman, hardly looking at Bob. "Just lay low, and trust Micah Davis to 'tend to the scamps."

Bob crawled under the nearest counter and in a few minutes he heard the men at the door.

" 'Lo, Davis," said one conciliatingly. "Seen anything of a fresh kid—freckled, good clothes, right out of the East? He tried to pass some bad money at Jake Hill's. Seen him?"

Bob nearly denounced this lie, but common sense saved him. Small use in seeking protection and then refusing it.

"Haven't seen anybody like that," said the groceryman positively. "Quit bruising those tomatoes, Bud."

"Well, he won't get out of town," stated Bud

sourly. "There's a girl with him, and they're figuring on taking the one-fifty-two. We're going down and picket the station. If Mr. Smarty gets on that train at all, his face won't look so pretty."

They tramped off, and Bob came out from his hiding place.

"They're a nice bunch!" he declared bitterly. "I got into a row with 'em because they were teasing a poor Chinaman and Betty Gordon landed on them for that. Then I tried to get her away from the place, and of course that started a fight. But I suppose they can dust the station with me if they're set on it—only I'll register a few protests."

"Now, now, we ain't a-going to have no battle," announced the genial Mr. Davis. "I knew Bud was lying soon as I looked at him. Why? 'Cause I never knew him to tell the truth. As for picketing the station, well, there's more ways than one to skin a cat."

CHAPTER VII

A YANKEE FRIEND

MICAH DAVIS was a Yankee, as he proudly told Bob, "born and raised in New Hampshire," and his shrewd common sense and dry humor stood him in good stead in the rather lawless environment of Chassada. He was well acquainted with the unlovely characteristics of the five who had chased Bob, and when he heard the whole story he promised to look up the Chinaman and see what he could do for him.

"If he's out of a job, I'd like to hire him," he said. "They're good, steady workers, and born cooks. He can have the room back of the store and do his own housekeeping. I'll stop in at Jake's this afternoon."

Bob was in a fever of fear that he would miss the train, and it was now a quarter of two. But Mr. Davis assured him that that special train was always late and that there was "all the time in the world to get to the station."

"I'm expecting some canned goods to come up from Wayne," he declared, "and I often go down after such stuff with my wheelbarrow.

Transportation's still limited with us, as you may have guessed. I calculate the best way to fool those smart Alecs is to put you in an empty packing case and tote you down. Comes last minute, you can jump out and there you are!"

Bob thought this a splendid plan, and said so.

"Then here's the very case, marked 'Flame City' on purpose-like," was the cheery rejoinder. "Help me lift it on the barrow, and then you climb in, and we'll make tracks. Comfortable? All right, we're off."

He adjusted the light lid over the top of the box, which was sufficiently roomy to allow Bob to sit down, and the curious journey began. Apparently it was a common occurrence for Mr. Davis to take a shipment of goods that way, for no one commented. As the wheelbarrow grated on the crushed stone that surrounded the station, Bob heard the voice of the man called Bud.

"One-fifty-two's late, as usual," he called. "That young scalawag hasn't turned up, either. Guess he's going to keep still till the last minute and figure on getting away with a dash. The girl's in the waiting-room."

"I'm surprised you're not in there looking in her suitcase for the young reprobate," said Mr. Davis with thinly veiled sarcasm. "What happened? Did Carl order you out?"

Carl, the listening Bob judged, must be the ticket agent.

"I'd like to see that whippersnapper order me out!" blustered Bud. "There's a whole raft of women in there, waiting for the train."

Mr. Davis carefully lowered the wheelbarrow and leaned carelessly against the box.

"Guess I'll go in and see the girl—like to know how she looks," he observed a bit more loudly than was necessary.

Bob understood that he was going to explain to Betty and he thanked him silently with all his heart.

The friendly Mr. Davis strolled into the waiting room and had no difficulty in recognizing Betty Gordon. She was the only girl in the room, in the first place, and she sat facing the door, a bag on either side of her, and a world of anxiety in her dark eyes. The groceryman crossed the floor and took the vacant seat at her right. There was no one within earshot.

"Don't you be scared, Miss," he said quietly. "I'm Micah Davis, and I just want to tell you that everything's all right with that Bob boy. I've got him out here in a box, and when the train comes he's a-going to hop on board before you can say Jack Robinson."

"Oh, you dear!" Betty turned upon the astonished Mr. Davis with a radiant smile. "I was

worried to death about him, because those dreadful men have been hanging around the station, and they keep peering in here. You're so good to help Bob!"

Mr. Davis stammered confusedly that he had done nothing, and then hurried on to advise Betty to pay no attention to anything that might happen, but to let the conductor help her on the train.

"I've got to wheel the lad down toward the baggage car," he explained, "so's they won't suspect. You see, Miss, this is an oil town and folks do pretty much as they please. If a gang want to beat up a stranger they don't find much opposition. In a few years we'll have better order, but just now the toughs have it. Sorry you had to have this experience."

"I'll always remember Chassada pleasantly because of you," said Betty impulsively. "Hark! Isn't that the train? Yes, it is. Don't mind me —go back to Bob. I'm all right, honestly I am!"

They shook hands hurriedly, and Betty followed the other passengers out to the platform. She caught a glimpse of Mr. Davis placidly trundling his wheelbarrow down the platform, and then the train pulled in and the conductor helped her aboard.

"Express?" called the baggage-car man as the

wheelbarrow was halted beside the truck on which he was tumbling a pile of boxes.

"Sure, express," retorted Mr. Davis. "Live stock this time. A passenger for you, with his ticket and all. Let him go through to the coaches, George. It's all right. He'll explain."

He lifted the lid of the box and Bob stepped out. The baggage-man stared, but he knew and trusted Mr. Davis.

"Don't thank me, lad," said the groceryman kindly as Bob tried to pour out his thanks. "You're from my part of the country, and any boy in trouble claims my help. There, there, for goodness' sake, are you going to miss the train after all the trouble I've taken?"

He pushed Bob gently toward the door of the baggage car and the boy scrambled in. Then, and not until then, did the vociferous Bud see what was going on. He dared not tackle the groceryman, but he came running pellmell down the platform to bray at Bob.

"You big coward!" he yelled. "Sneaking away, aren't you? Just let me catch you in this town again, and I'll make it so hot for you you'll wish you'd never left your kindergarten back East."

He was so angry he fairly danced with rage, and Bob and the baggage man both had to laugh.

"Laugh, you big boob!" howled Bud. "You

wouldn't think it so funny if I had you by the collar. 'Fraid to fight, aren't you? You wait! Some day I'll get you and I'll—I'll drown you!"

Bud had made an unfortunate choice of punishment, for his words carried a suggestion to Bob. Mail and express was still being unloaded, and beside the track was a large puddle of oily, dirty water apparently from a leaky pipe, for there were no indications of a recent rain.

With a swift spring, Bob was on his feet beside the surprised Bud, and, seizing him, whirled him sharply about. Then with a strong push he sent him flat into the puddle.

Sputtering, gasping, and actually crying with rage, the bully stumbled to his feet and charged blindly for Bob. That agile youth had turned and dashed for the train, which was now slowly moving. He caught the steps of the baggage car and drew himself up. Once on the platform he turned to wave to Mr. Davis, but that good citizen was holding back the foaming Bud from dashing himself against the wheels and did not see Bob's farewell.

"Whew!" gasped Bob, making his way to Betty, after going through an apparently endless number of cars, "our Western adventures begin with a rush, don't they? I'm hoping Flame City will be peaceful, for I've had enough excitement to last me a week."

"I wish Mr. Davis lived in Flame City," said Betty warmly. "I never knew any one to be kinder. Imagine all the trouble he took for you, Bob."

Bob agreed that the groceryman was a living example of the Golden Rule, and then the sight of oil derricks in the distance changed the trend of their thoughts.

"Where do you suppose those two sharpers—what were their names?—could have gone?" said Betty. "Seems to me, there are a lot of unpleasant people out here, after all."

"You mean Blosser and Fluss," replied Bob. "I don't know where they went, but I'm certain they are not up to anything good. Still, it isn't fair to say we've come in contact with a lot of unpleasant people, Betty. All new developments have to fight against the undesirable element, Mr. Littell says. You see, the prospect of making money would naturally attract them, and that, coupled with the possibility of meeting trusting and ignorant souls who have a little and want to make more, draws the crooks. It has always been that way. Haven't you read about the things that happened in California when there was the rush of gold seekers?"

Betty was not especially interested in the gold seekers, but the glimpses she had had of the oil industry fascinated her. She hoped that her Un-

cle Dick would have time to take them around, and she was divided between an automobile and a horse as the choicest medium of sightseeing.

"Well, I'd like to ride," declared Bob when she sought his opinion. "I've always wanted to. But I don't intend to see the sights, altogether, Betty. I want to find my aunts, and then, if possible, I'd like to get a job. There must be plenty for a boy to do out here."

"But you've been working all summer," protested Betty, "You're as thin as a rail now. I know Uncle Dick won't let you go to work. Why, Bob, I counted on your going around with me! We can have such fun together."

"Well, of course, there will be lots of odd hours," Bob comforted her. "I don't intend to borrow any more money, Betty, that's flat. And if I don't get my share in the farm, that is, if it proves my mother never had any sisters and never was entitled to a share of anything, I don't intend to let that be the end of my ambitions. I'm going to school, if it takes an arm!"

Betty gazed at him respectfully. Bob, when in earnest, was a very convincing talker. She wondered for a moment what he would be when he grew up.

"We're coming into Flame City," he warned her before she could put this thought into words.

"Tip your hat straight, Betsey, and take the camera. I can manage both bags."

"Oh, I hope Uncle Dick will meet us!" Betty was so excited she bumped her nose against the glass trying to see out of the window. "Look, Bob, just see those derricks! This is surely an oil town!"

The brakes went down, and the brakeman at the end of the car flung the door open.

"Flame City!" he shouted. "All out for Flame City!"

CHAPTER VIII

FLAME CITY

Bob and Betty descended the steps and found themselves on a rough platform with an unpainted shelter in the center that evidently did duty as a station. There were a few straggling loungers about, a team or two backed up to the platform, and a small automobile of the runabout type, red with rust.

"Well, bless her heart, how she's grown!" cried a cordial voice, and Mr. Richard Gordon had Betty in his arms.

"Uncle Dick! You don't know how glad I am to see you!" Betty hugged him tight, thankful that the worry and anxiety and uncertainty of the last few weeks, while she had waited in Washington to hear from him, was at last over. "How tanned you are!" she added.

"Oh, I'm a regular Indian," was the laughing response. "This must be Bob? Glad to see you, my boy. I feel that I already know you."

He and Bob shook hands heartily. Mr. Gordon was tall and muscular, with closely-cropped gray hair and quizzical gray eyes slightly puck-

ered at the corners from much staring in the hot sun. His face and hands were very brown, and he looked like a man who lead an outdoor life and liked it.

Bob took to him at once, and the feeling seemed to be mutual, for Mr. Gordon kept a friendly hand on the boy's shoulder while he continued to scan him smilingly.

"Began to look as though we were never going to get together, didn't it?" Mr. Gordon said. "Last week there was a rumor that I might have to go to China for the firm, and I thought if that happened Betty would be in despair. However, that prospect is not immediate. Well, young folks, what do you think of Flame City, off-hand?"

Betty stared. From the station she could see half a dozen one-story shacks and, beyond, the outline of oil-well derricks. A straggling, muddy road wound away from the buildings. Trolley cars, stores and shops, brick buildings to serve as libraries and schools—there seemed to be none.

"Is this all of it?" she ventured.

"You see before you," declared Mr. Gordon gravely, "the rapidly growing town of Flame City. Two months ago there wasn't even a station. We think we've done rather well, though I suppose to Eastern eyes the signposts of a

flourishing town are conspicuous by their absence."

"But where do people live?" demanded Betty, puzzled. "If they come here to work or to buy land, isn't there a hotel to live in? Where do you live, Uncle Dick?"

"Mostly in my tin boat," was the answer. "Many's the night I've slept in the car. But of course I have a bunk out at the field. Accommodations are extremely limited, Betty, I will admit. The few houses that take in travelers are over-crowded and dirty. If some one had enterprise enough to start a good hotel he'd make a fortune. But like all oil towns, the fever is to sink one's money in wells."

Betty's eyes turned to the horizon where the steel towers reared against the sky.

"Can we go to see the oil fields now?" she asked. "We're not a bit tired, are we, Bob?"

Mr. Gordon surveyed his niece banteringly.

"What is your idea of an oil field?" he teased. "A bit of pasture neatly fenced in, say two or three acres in area? Did you know that our company at present holds leases for over four thousand acres? The nearest well is ten miles from this station. No, child, I don't think we'll run out and look around before supper. I want to take you and Bob to a place I've found where I think you'll be comfortable. Have you trunk checks?

We'll have to take all baggage with us, because I'm leaving to-morrow for a three-day inspection trip, and the Watterbys can't be expected to do much hauling."

Bob had the checks, one for Betty's trunk and another for a small old-fashioned "telescope" he had bought cheaply in Washington and which held his meagre supply of clothing.

"We'll stow everything in somehow," promised Mr. Gordon cheerily, as he and Bob carried the baggage over to the rusty little automobile. "You wouldn't think this machine would hold together an hour on these roads," he continued, "but she's the best friend I have. Never complains as long as the gasoline holds out. There! I think that will stay put, Bob. Now in with you, Betty, and we'll be off."

Bob perched himself upon the trunk, and Mr. Gordon took his place at the wheel. With a grunt and a lurch, the car started.

"I suppose you youngsters would like to know where you're going," said Mr. Gordon, deftly avoiding the ruts in the miserable road. "Well, I'll warn you it is a farm, and probably Bramble Farm will shine in contrast. But Flame City is impossible, and when everybody is roughing it, you'll soon grow used to the idea. The Watterbys are nice folks, native farmers, and what they lack in initiative they make up in kindness

of heart. I'm sorry I have to leave to-morrow morning, but every minute counts, and I have no right to put personal business first."

He turned to Bob.

"You don't know what a help you are going to be," he said heartily. "I really doubt if I should have had Betty come, if at the last moment she had not telegraphed me you were coming, too. It's no place out here for a girl——Oh, you needn't try to wheedle me, my dear, I know what I'm saying," he interpolated in answer to an imploring look from his niece. "No place for a girl," he repeated firmly. "I shall have no time to look after her, and she can't roam the country wild. Grandma Watterby is too old to go round with her, and the daughter-in-law has her hands full. I'd like nothing better, Bob, than to take you with me to-morrow, and you'd learn a lot of value to you, too, on a trip of this kind. But I honestly want you to stay with Betty; a brother is a necessity now if ever one was."

Bob flushed with pleasure. That Mr. Gordon, who had never seen him and knew him only through Betty's letters and those the Littells had written, should put this trust in him touched the lad mightily. What did he care about a tour of the oil fields if he could be of service to a man like this? And he knew that Mr. Gordon was honest in his wish to have his niece protected.

Betty was high-spirited and headstrong, and, having lived in settled communities all her life, was totally ignorant of any other existence.

"Listen, Uncle Dick," broke in Betty at this point. "Do you know anybody around here by the name of Saunders?"

"Saunders?" repeated her uncle thoughtfully. "Why, no, I don't recollect ever having heard the name. But then, you see, I know comparatively little about the surrounding country. I've fairly lived at the wells this summer. I only stumbled on the Watterbys by chance one day when my car broke down. Why? Do you know a family by that name?"

So Betty, helped out by Bob, explained their interest in the mythical "Saunders place," and Mr. Gordon listened in astonishment.

"Guess they're the aunts you're looking for, Bob," he said briefly, when he was in possession of the facts. "Couldn't be many families of that name around here, not unless they were related. Do you know, there's a lot of that tricky business afoot right here in Flame City? People have lost their heads over oil, and the sight of a handful of bills drives them crazy. The Watterby farm is one of the few places that hasn't been rushed by oil prospectors. That's one reason why I chose it."

They were now on a lonely stretch of road with

gently rolling land on either side of them, dotted with a scrubby growth of trees. Not a house was in sight, and they had passed only one team, a pair of mules harnessed to a wagon filled with lengths of iron pipe.

"You'll know all about oil before you're through," said Mr. Gordon suddenly. Then he laughed.

"It's in the very air," he explained. "We talk oil, think oil, and sometimes I think, we eat oil. Leastways I know I've tasted it in the air on more than one occasion."

Betty had been silently turning something over in her mind.

"Isn't there danger from fire?" she asked presently.

"There certainly is," affirmed her uncle. "We've had one bad fire this season, and I don't suppose the subject is ever out of our minds very long at a time. Sandbags are always kept ready, but let a well get to burning once, and all the sandbags in the world won't stop it."

"I wouldn't want a well to burn," said Bob slowly, "but if one should, I shouldn't mind seeing it."

"You wouldn't see much but thick smoke," rejoined Mr. Gordon. "I've some pictures of burning wells I'll show you when I can get them out.

Nothing but huge columns of heavy black smoke that smudges up the landscape."

"Like the lamp that smoked one night when Mrs. Peabody turned it down too low—remember, Bob?" suggested Betty. "Next morning everything in the room was peppered with greasy soot."

"Look ahead, and you'll see the Watterby farm —'place,' in the vernacular of the countryside," announced Mr. Gordon. "Unlike the Eastern farms, very few homes are named. There's Grandma Watterby watching for us."

Bob and Betty looked with interest. They saw a gaunt, plain house, two stories in height, without window blinds or porch of any sort, and if ever painted now so weather-beaten that the original color was indistinguishable. A few flowers bloomed around the doorstep but there was no attempt at a lawn. A huddle of buildings back of the house evidently made up the barns and outhouses, and chickens stalked at will in the roadside.

These fled, squawking, when Mr. Gordon ran the car into the ditch and an old woman hobbled out to greet him.

"Well, Grandma," he called cheerily, raising his voice, for she was slightly deaf, "I've brought you two young folks bag and baggage, just as I

promised. I suspect they've brought appetites with them, too."

"Glad to see you," said the old woman, putting out a gnarled hand. Her eyes were bright and clear as a bird's, and she had a quick, darting way of glancing at one that was like a bird, too. "Emma's got the supper on," she announced. "She's frying chicken."

"I'll go in and tell Mrs. Watterby that she may count on me," declared Mr. Gordon jovially, as Bob jumped down and helped Betty out. "I never miss a chance to eat fried chicken, never. I wonder if it will be fried in oil?"

"Emma uses lard," said Grandma Watterby placidly.

CHAPTER IX

OLD INDIAN LORE

Mr. Gordon stayed over night, but was off early in the morning. Bob and Betty watched his rickety car out of sight, and then, determined to keep busy and happy, set out to explore the Watterby farm.

The family, they had discovered at supper the night before, consisted of Grandma Watterby, her son Will, a man of about forty-five, and the daughter-in-law, Emma, a tall, silent woman with a wrinkled, leathery skin, a harsh voice, and the kindest heart in the world. An Indian helped Mr. Watterby run the farm. In addition there were two boarders, a man and his wife who had come West for the latter's health and who, for the sake of the glorious air, put up with many minor inconveniences. They were very homesick for the East, and asked Bob and Betty many questions.

"Just think, Bob," said Betty, as she and Bob went out to the barn (they had been told that they were free to go anywhere), "there's no running water in the house. Mrs. Watterby carries in every bit that's used for drinking and wash-

ing. She was up at four o'clock this morning, carrying water to fill the tubs; she is doing the washing now."

"Water's as hard as a rock, too," commented Bob. "I suppose that's the alkali. Did you notice how harsh and dry Mrs. Watterby's face looks? Seems to me I'd rather drill for water than for oil, and the first thing I'd do would be to pump a line into the house. They've lived on this farm for sixty years, your uncle said. At least Grandma Watterby has. And I don't believe they've done one thing to it, that could be called an improvement."

"Here's the Indian," whispered Betty. "Make him talk, Bob. I like to hear him."

The Indian had eaten at the same table with the family, after the farm fashion, and Betty had been fascinated by the monosyllabic replies he had given to questions asked him. He was patching a harness in the doorway of the barn and glanced up unsmilingly at them. Nevertheless he did not seem hostile or unfriendly.

"You come to see oil fields?" he asked unexpectedly. "You help uncle own big well, yes? Indians know about oil hundreds of years ago."

"Uncle Dick is working for a big oil company," explained Betty. "I don't think he owns any wells himself. Tell us something about the Indians? Are there many around here?"

There was an old sawhorse beside the door, and she sat down comfortably on that, while Bob, picking up a handy stick of wood, drew a knife from his pocket and began to whittle.

The Indian was silent for a few minutes. Then he spoke slowly, his needle stabbing the heavy leather at regular intervals.

"Wherever there is oil, there were Indians once," he announced. "Ask any oil man and he will tell you. At Lake Erie, in Pennsylvania and some parts of New York State, where dwelt the Iroquois, many years after oil was found. It is true, for I have read and heard it."

"Were the Iroquois in New York State?" asked Bob interestedly. "I've always read of the Mohawks, but not about them."

The Indian glanced at him gravely.

"The Mohawks were an Iroquois tribe," he explained courteously. "Mohawks, Senecas, Tionontati, Cayuga, Oneida—all were tribes of the Iroquois. Yes I see you recognize those names—many places in this country have been named for Indians."

"Are you an Iroquois?" asked Betty, rather timidly, for she feared lest the question should be considered impolite.

"I am a Kiowa," announced the redman proudly. "Oklahoma and Kansas were the home of the Kiowas, the Pawnees and the Comanches.

And you see oil has been found here. In Texas, where the big oil fields are, once roved Wichitas. The Dakotas, some tribes of which were the Biloxi, the Opelousas and the Pascagoulas, lived on the gulf plains of Louisiana. Out in southern California, where the oil wells now flow, the Yokut Indians once owned the land. They tell me that where oil had been discovered in Central America, petroleum seeps to the surface of the land where once the Indian tribes were found."

"Did the Indians use the oil?" asked Bob. He, like Betty, was fascinated with the musical names of the mysterious tribes as they rolled easily from the Kiowa's tongue.

"Not as the white man does," was the answer. "The Senecas skimmed the streams for oil and sometimes spread blankets over the water till they were heavy with the oil. They used oil for cuts and burns and were famed for their skill in removing the water from the oil by boiling. Dances and religious rites were observed with the aid of oil. The Siouan Indians, who lived in West Virginia and Virginia, knew, too, of natural gas. They tossed in burning brands and watched the flames leap up from pits they themselves had dug.

"You will find," the Indian continued, evidently approving of the rapt attention of his audience, "many wells now owned by Indians and leased to

white-men companies. The Osage have big holdings. They are reservation Indians, mostly—perhaps they can not help that. I must go to the plowing."

He gathered up his harness and went off to the field, and Bob and Betty resumed their explorations, talking about him with interest. Their tour of the shabby outbuildings was soon completed, and just in time for a huge bell rung vigorously announced that dinner was on the table.

That afternoon they found Grandma Watterby braiding rugs under the one large tree in the side yard, and she welcomed them warmly.

"I was just wishing for some one to talk to," she said cheerfully. "Can't you sit a while? There isn't much for young 'uns to do, and I says to your uncle it was a good thing there was two of you—at least you can talk."

"What lovely rugs!" exclaimed Betty, examining the old woman's work. "See, Bob, they're braided, just like the colonial rag rugs you see in pictures. Can't I do some?"

"Sure you can braid," said the old woman. "It's easy. I'll show you, and then I'll sew some while you braid."

"Let me braid, too," urged Bob. "My fingers aren't all thumbs, if I am a boy."

"Well now," fluttered Grandma Watterby, pleased as could be, "I don't know when I've had

somebody give me a lift. Working all by yourself is tedious-like, and Emma don't get a minute to set down. My brother used to make lots of mats to sell; he could braid 'em tighter than I can."

She showed Betty how to braid and then started Bob on three strips. Then she took up the sewing of strips already braided.

"We were talking to the Indian this morning," said Betty idly. "He told us a lot about Indians—how wherever they have been oil has been discovered. Does he really know?"

"Ki has been to Government school, and knows a heap," nodded Grandma Watterby. "What he tells you's likely to be so. I don't rightly know myself about what they have to do with the oil, but Will was saying only the other night that the Osage Indians have been paid millions of dollars within the last few years."

Her keen old eyes were sparkling, and she was sewing with the quick, darting motion that they soon learned was characteristic of everything she did. She must be very old, Bob decided, watching her shriveled hands, knotted by rheumatism, and the idea of age put another thought into his head.

"Mr. Gordon said you'd lived on this farm for sixty years, Grandma," the boy said suddenly. It had been explained to them that the old lady

liked every one to use that title. "You must know 'most every one in the neighborhood."

"Fred Watterby brought me here the day we were married," the old woman replied, letting her sewing fall into her lap. "Sixty years ago come next October. I was married on my seventeenth birthday."

She sat in a little reverie, and Bob and Betty braided quietly, unwilling to disturb her, although the same question was in their minds. Then Grandma Watterby took up her sewing with a sigh, and the spell was broken.

"Know everybody in the neighborhood?" she echoed Bob's statement. "Yes, I used to. But with so many moving in and such a lot of oil folks, why, there's days when I don't see a rig pass the house I know."

Betty and Bob spoke simultaneously.

"Do you know any one named Saunders?" they chorused.

CHAPTER X

BOB LEARNS SOMETHING

GRANDMA WATTERBY considered gravely.

"Saunders? Saunders?" she repeated reflectively, while Betty squeezed Bob's arm in an agony of hopeful excitement. "Seems to me—now wait a minute, and don't hurry me. When you hurry me, I get mixed in my mind."

Betty and Bob waited in respectful silence. The old woman rubbed her forehead fretfully, but gradually her expression cleared.

"There was a Saunders family," she murmured, half to herself. "Three girls, wasn't there—or was it four? No, three, and only one of 'em married. What was her name—Faith? Yes, that's it, Faith. A pretty girl she was, with eyes as blue as a lake and ripply hair she wore in a big knot. I always did want to see that hair down her back, and one day I told her so.

" 'How long is it, Faith?' I asked her. 'When I was a girl we wore our hair down our backs in a braid and was thankful to our Creator for the blessing of a heavy head of hair.'

"Faith laughed and laughed. I can see her

now; she had a funny way of crinkling up her eyes when she laughed.

" 'I'll take it down for you, Mrs. Watterby,' she says; and, my land, if she didn't pull out every pin and let her hair tumble down her back. It was a foot below her waist, too. I never saw such a head o' hair."

Bob looked up at the old woman with shining eyes.

"That was my mother," he said quietly.

"Your mother!" Grandma Watterby's tone was startled. Then her face broke into a wrinkled smile.

"Well, now, ain't I stupid?" she demanded eagerly. "My head isn't what it used to be. Course you are Faith Saunders' son. She married David Henderson, a likely young carpenter. Dear, dear, to think you're Faith's boy. My, wouldn't your grandma have been proud to see you!"

"Did you know her?" asked Bob hungrily. Deprived of kin for so many years, even the claim to relatives, he was pathetically starved for the details taken for granted by the average boy.

"Your grandpa and your grandma," pronounced Grandma Watterby, "died 'bout a year after your ma was married. I guess they never saw you. Your aunties was all of twenty years older than she was. Your ma was the youngest of a

large family of children, but they all died babies 'cept the two oldest and the youngest. Funny wasn't it?"

Betty waved her braiding wildly.

"Bob was told he had two aunts," she cried excitedly. "They're still living, aren't they, Grandma Watterby? Do they live near here?"

"I dunno whether they're living or not," said the old woman cautiously. "Seems like I would'a' heard if they had died, but mebbe not. I don't go out much any more, and Emma's no hand for news. Mebbe they died. I ain't heard a word 'bout the Saunders family for years and years. Where's your father, boy?"

"He died," said Bob simply. "He was killed in a railroad wreck, and I guess my mother nearly lost her mind. They found her wandering around the country, with only her wedding certificate and a few other papers in a little tin box. And she was sent to the poorhouse. That night I was born, and she died."

"Dear! dear!" mourned Grandma Watterby, a mist gathering on her spectacles. "Poor, pretty Faith Saunders! In the poorhouse! The Saunders was never what you might call rich, but I guess none of 'em ever saw the inside of the almshouse. And David Henderson was as fine a young man as you'd want to see. When Faith married him and he took her away from here, folks thought

they'd go far in the world. I wonder if Hope and Charity ever tried to find out what became of her?"

"Hope and Charity?" repeated Bob. "Are those my aunts?"

"Yes, Hope and Charity Saunders—they was twins," said the old lady. "Nice girls, too; and they thought everything of Faith. She was so much younger and so pretty, and they were like mothers to her. And she died in the poorhouse! Why didn't they send her baby back to the girls? They'd 'a' taken care of you and brought you up like their own."

Bob explained that his mother's mental condition had baffled the endeavors of the authorities to get information from her regarding her home and friends, and that she had evidently walked so many miles from the scene of the wreck that no attempt was made to identify his father's body. A baby was no novelty in the poorhouse, and no one was greatly interested in establishing a circle of relatives for him, and, except for a happy coincidence, he might have remained in ignorance of his mother's people all his life.

"I must find out where my aunts live," he concluded. "I overheard some chaps on the train talking about the Saunders place, and Betty and I decided that that must be the homestead farm. They may not live there now, but surely whoever

does, could give me a clue. Do you know of a place so called around here? Or would Mr. Watterby?"

"I don't know where the Saunders place is," replied Grandma Watterby, genuinely troubled. "Will wouldn't know, 'cause he's only farmed here five years, having his own place till his pa died. If I recollect right, the Saunders didn't live round here, not right round here, that is. Let's see, it's all of fifteen years since Faith was married. I lost sight of the girls after she left, and they stopped driving in to see us. Where was their place? I know I went to old Mrs. Saunders' funeral. Well, anyway, I got this much straight—there was three hills right back of the house. I'd know 'em if I saw 'em in Japan—them three hills! You watch for 'em, boy, and when you lay eyes on 'em you'll know you've found the Saunders place!"

And that was the most definite direction Bob could hope for. Grandma Watterby had the weight of years upon her, and she could not remember the road that led to the farm she had often visited. Though in the days that followed she recollected various bits of information about Bob's mother and her life as a girl, to which he listened eagerly, she was utterly unable to locate the farm. She kept mentioning the three hills, however, and her son, overhearing, smiled a little.

"Mother never did pay much attention to roads and like-a-that," he commented dryly. "She always found her way around like the Babes in the Wood—by remembering something she had passed coming over."

The Watterby place was a curious mixture of primitive farming methods, ranching tactics, and Indian folklore, with a sprinkling of furtherest East and West for good measure. Will Watterby attributed his cosmopolitan plan of work to the influence of the ever-changing hired man.

"They come and they go, mostly go," he was fond of saying. "It's easier for me to do the hired man's way, 'cause I can't go off when things don't suit me. Our place seems to be a half-way station for all the tramps in creation. I reckon they get off at Flame City, and, headed east or west, have to earn the money for the rest of their trip. Well, anyway, I don't believe in being narrow; if a man can show me a better way to do a job, I'm willing to be shown."

"I simply have to have a clean middy blouse to wear to-morrow when Uncle Dick gets back," Betty confided to Bob. "And I don't intend to let Mrs. Watterby wash and iron it for me. Can't you fix me a tub of water somewhere out in the barn? I'll do it myself and spread it on the grass to dry. Then, when she's getting supper, I can heat an iron and press it."

Bob was willing; indeed he needed clean collars himself, and had reached the decision that there was only one way to get them. Inquiry had established the fact that there was no laundry in Flame City, and the genus washwoman was practically unknown.

Betty went in to get her middy blouse, and Bob pumped pail after pail of water and carried it to the barn. One pump supplied the whole farm, house and barns. The two cows, three horses, and the pigs and chickens were watered thrice daily by the patient Ki.

Cold water was not the only difficulty Betty encountered when she came to the actual washing. The soap would not lather, and a thick white scum formed on the water when she tried to churn up a suds.

"Hard," said Bob laconically. "Got to have something to put in to soften it. Borax is good; know where there is any?"

Betty remembered having seen a box of borax on the kitchen shelf, and Bob volunteered to go for it. When he returned with it, he brought the news that there was a peddler at the back door with a bewildering "assortment of everything," Bob said.

"Put a lot of this in," he directed, handing the box to Betty, who obediently shook in half the contents. "Now we'll put the stuff to soak, and

go and look at this fellow's stuff. When you come back to wash, all you'll have to do will be to rinse 'em out and put them out to dry."

This sounded plausible, and the middy blouse and collars were left to soak themselves clean.

The peddler proved to have a horse and wagon, and he carried dress goods, notions, kitchen wear, books, stationery and candy. Bob and Betty had never seen a wagon fitted up like this, and they thought it far better than a store.

"I might buy that dotted swiss shirtwaist," whispered Betty, as Mrs. Watterby ordered five yards of apron gingham measured off. "My middy blouse might not dry in time."

"All right. And I'll get a clean collar," agreed Bob. "These aren't much and I suppose they're too cheap to last long, but at any rate they're clean."

The peddler drove on at last, and then Bob and Betty hurried back to their washing. Alas, the tub had disappeared. At supper that night, Mrs. Watterby had missed it and demanded of her husband if he had seen it.

"Sure, I had Ki spraying the henhouse this afternoon," Watterby rejoined. "Thought you'd mixed the soapsuds and washing soda for him. It was standing in the barn."

Betty explained. Of her blouse and Bob's collars, there remained a few ragged shreds, for

she had poured enough washing powder in to eat the fabric full of holes. She took her loss good-naturedly and was thankful she had the new blouse to wear.

Uncle Dick, when he heard the story, went into gales of laughter.

"Tough luck, Kitten," he comforted her. "We'll go to see an oil fire this afternoon and that'll take your mind off your troubles."

CHAPTER XI

AN OIL FIRE

Mr. Gordon had arrived the night of the disastrous laundry experiment, and made his announcement at the supper table.

"An oil fire!" ejaculated Betty. "Where is it? Won't it burn the offices and houses? Perhaps they'll have it put out before we get there!"

Mr. Gordon did not seem to be at all excited, and continued to eat his supper placidly. He looked tired, and he later admitted that he had slept little the night before, having spent the time discussing ways of putting out the fire with the well foreman.

"No, we'll get to it in plenty of time in the morning," he assured his niece. "An oil fire is less dangerous than expensive, my dear. We've got a man coming up from beyond Tippewa with a sand blast on the first train. Telegraphed for him to-night. It will cost fifteen hundred dollars to put the fire out, but it's worth it."

"Fifteen hundred dollars!" Betty stared aghast.

"Well, think of the barrels of oil burning up," returned her uncle. "The fire's been going since

yesterday afternoon. The normal output of that well is round about three thousand barrels a day. Every twenty-four hours she burns, that much oil is lost to us. So we count the fifteen hundred cheap."

The Watterby household had the farm habit of retiring early, and to-night Betty and Bob were anxious to get to sleep early, too, that they might have a good start in the morning. Mr. Gordon was glad to turn in when the rest did and make up for lost sleep, so by nine o'clock the house was wrapped in slumber.

An hour or two later Betty was awakened by what sounded like a shot. Startled, she listened for a moment, and then, hearing no further commotion, went to sleep again.

She was the first one down in the morning, barring Mrs. Watterby, who, winter and summer, rose at half-past four or earlier. Going out to the pump for a drink of water she saw Ki bending over something beside the woodshed.

"Hey!" he hailed her, without getting up. "Come see what I got."

Ki and Betty were now excellent friends, the taciturn Indian apparently recognizing that her interest in his stories and Indian tales was unfeigned.

"Why, what is it?" she asked, stopping in

amazement as her foot touched a furry body. "Is it a dog? Oh, Ki, you didn't kill a dog?"

"No, not a dog," said the Indian showing his white teeth in a grin which was the nearest he ever permitted himself to come to a laugh. "Not a dog—a fox. I shot him last night. He would eat Mis' Watterby's chickens."

"So that was what I heard," Betty said, recalling the noise that had wakened her. "Bob, come and see the fox Ki shot."

Bob came running over to the woodshed, and appraised the reddish yellow body admiringly.

"Gee, he was a big one, wasn't he?" he murmured. "When'd you shoot him, Ki? Last night? I didn't hear anything. Stealing chickens, I'll bet a feather."

Ki nodded, and displayed a shining knife.

"You watch," he told them. "I skin him, and cure the fur—then I give it to Miss Betty. Make her a nice what you call neck-piece next winter."

"Oh, don't skin him!" Betty involuntarily shuddered. "I couldn't bear to watch you do that. He will bleed, and I'll think it hurts him. Poor little fox—I hate to see dead things!"

Her lips quivered, and Ki looked hurt.

"You no want a neck-piece?" he asked, bewildered. "Very nice young ladies wear them. I have seen."

Betty smiled at him through the tears that would come.

"I would love to have the fur," she explained. "Only I'm such a coward I can't bear to see you skin the fox. I heard a man say once that women are all alike—we don't care if animals are killed to give us clothes, but we want some one else to do the killing."

Somewhat to her surprise, Ki seemed to understand.

"Bob help me skin him," he announced quietly. "You go in. When the fur is dry and clean, you have it for your neck-piece."

Betty thanked him and ran away to tell Mr. Gordon and Grandma Watterby of her present. A handsome fox skin was not to be despised, and Betty was all girl when it came to pretty clothes and furs.

Ki and Bob came in to breakfast, and the talk turned to the oil fire. Mr. Gordon generously invited as many as could get into his machine to go, but Mrs. Price could not stand excitement and the Watterbys were too busy to indulge in that luxury. Will Watterby offered to let Ki go, but the Indian had a curious antipathy to oil fields. Grandma Watterby always insisted it was because he was not a Reservation Indian and, unlike many of them, owned no oil lands.

"I'd go with you myself," she declared brightly,

"if the misery in my back wasn't a little mite onery this mornin'. Racketing about in that contraption o' yours, I reckon, wouldn't be the best kind of liniment for cricks like mine."

So only Mr. Gordon, Betty and Bob started for the fields.

"I saw a horse that I think will about suit you, Betty," said her uncle when they were well away from the house. "I'm having it sent out to-morrow. She is reputed gentle and used to being ridden by a woman. Then, if we can pick up some kind of a nag for Bob, you two needn't be tied down to the farm. All the orders I have for you is that you're to keep away from the town. Ride as far into the country as you like."

"But, Mr. Gordon," protested Bob, "I don't want you to get a horse for me! I'd rather have a job. Isn't there something I can do out at the oil fields? I'm used to looking out for myself."

"Look here, young man," came the reply with mock severity, "I thought I told you you had a job on your hands looking after Betty. I meant it. I can't go round on these inspection trips unless I can feel that she is all right. And, by the way, have you any objection to calling me Uncle Dick? I think I rather fancy the idea of a nephew."

Bob, of course, felt more at ease then, and

Betty, too, was pleased. The boy found it easy to call Mr. Gordon "Uncle Dick," and as time went on and they became firmer friends it seemed most natural that he should do so.

They were approaching the oil fields gradually, the road, which was full of treacherous ruts, being anything but straight. Whenever they met a team or another car, which was infrequently, they had to stop far to one side and let the other vehicle pass. Betty was much impressed with her first near view of the immense derricks.

"What a lot of them!" she said. "Just like a forest, isn't it, Uncle Dick?"

Her uncle frowned preoccupiedly.

"Those are not our fields," he announced curtly. "They're mostly the property of small leaseholders. It is mighty wasteful, Betty, to drill like that, cutting up the land into small holdings, and is bound to make trouble. They have no storage facilities, and if the pipe lines can't take all the oil produced, there is congestion right away. Also many of the leases are on short terms, and that means they've the one idea of getting all the oil out they can while they hold the land. So they tend to exhaust the sands early, and violate the principles of conservation."

They were following the road through the oil fields now, and presently Mr. Gordon announced that they were on his company's holdings. At

the same time they saw a column of dense black smoke towering toward the sky.

"There's the fire!" cried Betty. "Do hurry, Uncle Dick!"

Obediently the little car let out a notch, and they drew up beside a group of men, still some distance from the fire.

"Chandler's come," said one of these respectfully to Mr. Gordon. "The five-ton truck brought up a load of sand, and they're only waiting for you to give the word."

The speaker was introduced to Betty and Bob as Dave Thorne, a well foreman, and at a word from Mr. Gordon he jumped on the running board of the car and they proceeded another mile. This brought them to the load of sand dumped on one side of the road and the powerful high-pressure hose that had been brought up on the train that morning. The heat from the burning well was intense, though they were still some distance from the actual fire.

"Now, Betty, watch and you'll see a fire put out," commanded her uncle, getting out of the car and going forward, first cautioning both young people to stay where they were and not get in any one's way.

A half dozen men lifted the heavy hose, turned the nozzle toward the column of smoke, and a shower of fine sand curved high in the air. For

perhaps five minutes nothing could be noticed; then, almost imperceptibly, the smoke began to die down. Lower, lower, and lower it fell, and at last died away. The men continued to pump in sand for an extra ten minutes as a matter of precaution, then stopped. The fire was out.

"That fire wasn't no accident, Boss," proclaimed Dave Thorne, wiping his perspiring face with a red handkerchief. "She was set. And, believe me, where there's one, there'll be others. The north section keeps me awake nights. If a fire started there where that close drilling's going on, it couldn't help but spread. You can fight fire in a single well, but let half a dozen of 'em flare up and there'll be more than oil lost.

"What a croaker you are, Dave," said Mr. Gordon lightly. "Don't lose sleep about any section. A night's rest is far too valuable to be squandered. These young folks want to see the sights, and I'll take them around for an hour or so. Then I'll go over that bill of lading with you. Come, Betty and Bob, we'll leave the machine and take the trail on foot. Mind your clothes and shoes—there's oil on everything you touch."

CHAPTER XII

IN THE FIELDS

"I ALWAYS thought oil was for lamps," said Betty, as she picked her way after her uncle and Bob, "but there aren't enough lamps in the world to use all this oil."

They were walking toward a pumping station still in the distance, and Mr. Gordon waited for her to come up with him.

"Perhaps lamps are the least important factor in the whole big question," he answered earnestly. "Oil is being used more and more for fuel. Oil burners have been perfected for ships. And schools, apartment houses and public buildings are being heated with oil in many cities. And, of course, the demand for gasolene is enormous. I rather think the engine of the train that brought you to Flame City was an oil burner."

"I wish we'd gone and looked, don't you, Bob?" said Betty. "Oh, what a big derrick! How many quarts of oil does that pump in a day, Uncle Dick?"

Mr. Gordon laughed heartily.

"Little Miss Tenderfoot!" he teased. "I

thought you knew, goosie, that we measured oil by barrels. That well is flowing slightly over five thousand barrels a day. Altogether our wells are now yielding well over fifty thousand barrels of oil a day."

"I read in one of the papers about a man who paid three thousand dollars for one acre of oil land," said Bob thoughtfully. "How did he know he was going to find oil here?"

"He didn't know," was the prompt answer. "There is no way of knowing positively. Many and many a small investor has lost the savings of a lifetime because he had a 'hunch' that he would bring in a good well. Right here in Oklahoma, statistics show that in one section, of five thousand two hundred and forty-six wells driven, one thousand three hundred and fifty-six were dry. Now it takes a lot of money to drive a well, between twenty and thirty thousand dollars in fact, so you may count up the loss."

"But there is oil here—just look!" Bob waved comprehensively toward the beehive of industry that surrounded them.

"Right, my boy. And when they do strike oil, they strike it rich. Huge fortunes have been made in oil and will be made again. If the crooks who pose as brokers and promoters would keep their hands off, it might be possible to safeguard some of the smaller speculators."

Bob was minded to speak again of the two sharpers he had overheard on the train, but they had reached the pumping station, and he and Betty were immediately interested in what Mr. Gordon had to show them.

There was a long bunk house at one side where the employees slept and ate and where a comfortable, fat Chinese cook was sweeping off the screened porch. The pumping station was another long, one-story building, with eight tall iron stacks rising beside it. Inside, set in a concrete floor, huge dynamos were pumping away, sending oil through miles and miles of pipe lines to points where it would be loaded into cars or ships and sent all over the world. The engineer in charge took them around and explained every piece of machinery, much to the delight of Bob who had a boy's love for things that went.

From the station they walked to one of the largest storage tanks, a huge reservoir of oil, capable of holding fifty-five thousand barrels when full, Mr. Gordon told them. It was half empty at the time, and three long flights of steps were bare that would be covered when the storage capacity was used.

"If there isn't a laundry or a hotel in Flame City," observed Betty suddenly, "there is everything to run the oil business with, that's certain.

Is it all right to say you have very complete equipment, Uncle Dick?"

"Your phrase is correct," admitted her uncle, smiling. "Poor tools are the height of folly for any business or worker, Betty. As for Flame City, the place is literally swamped. People poured in from the day the first good well came in, and they've been arriving in droves ever since. You can't persuade any of them to take up the business they had before—to run a boarding house, or open a restaurant or a store. No, every blessed one of 'em has set his heart on owning and operating an oil well. It was just so in the California gold drive—the forty-niners wanted a gold mine, and they walked right over those that lay at their feet."

They took the automobile after inspecting the storage tank and went several miles farther up the field to the gasolene plant that was isolated from the rest of the buildings. Here they saw how the crude petroleum was refined to make gasolene and were told the elaborate precautions observed to keep this highly inflammable produce from catching fire. Seven large steel tanks, built on brick foundations, were used for storage, and there was also a larger oil tank from which the oil to be refined was pumped.

"I'd like to see a ship that carries oil," remarked Betty, as they came out of the gasolene

plant and made their way to the automobile.

One of the men had happened to mention in her hearing that an unusually large shipment of oil had been ordered to be sent to Egypt.

"Well, that's one request we can't fill," acknowledged her uncle regretfully. "You're inland for sure, Betty, and the good old ocean is many miles from Oklahoma. However, some day I hope you'll see an oil tanker. The whole story of oil, from production to consumption, is a fascinating one, and not the least wonderful is the part that deals with the marketing side of it. We have salesmen in South America, China, Egypt, and practically every large country. Who knows but Bob will one day be our representative in the Orient?"

They had dinner, a merry noisy meal, with the men at the bunk house. It was a novelty Bob and Betty thoroughly enjoyed and they found the men, mostly clerical workers, a few bosses and Dave Thorne, the well foreman, a friendly, clever crowd who were to a man keenly interested in the work at the fields. They talked shop incessantly, and both Betty and Bob gained much accurate information of positive value.

After dinner Mr. Gordon drove them back to the Watterby farm, promising another trip soon. He had to go back immediately, and slept at the fields that night. Thereafter he came and went

as he could, sometimes being absent for two or three days at a time. The horse he had ordered for Betty arrived, and proved to be all that was said for it. She was a wiry little animal, and Betty christened her "Clover." For Bob, Mr. Gordon succeeded in capturing a big, rawboned white horse with a gift of astonishing speed. Riding horses were at a premium, for distances between wells were something to be reckoned with, and those who did not own a car had to depend on horses. Bob even saw one enthusiastic prospector mounted on a donkey.

As soon as they were used to their mounts, Betty and Bob began to go off for long rides, always remembering Mr. Gordon's injunction to stay away from the town.

"How tanned you are, Betty!" Bob said one day, as they were letting their horses walk after a brisk gallop. "I declare, you're almost as brown as Ki. I like you that way, though," he added hastily, as if he feared she might think he was criticising. "And that red tie is awfully pretty."

"You look like an Indian yourself," said Betty shyly.

But Bob's blue eyes, while attractive enough in his brown face, would preclude any idea that he might have Indian blood. Betty, on the other hand, as the boy said, was as brown as an In-

dian, and her dark eyes and heavy straight dark hair, which she now wore in a thick braid down her back, would have enabled her to play the part of Minnehaha, or that of a pretty Gypsy lass, with little trouble. Her khaki riding suit was very becoming, and to-day she had knotted a scarlet tie under the trim little collar that further emphasized her vivid coloring and the smooth tan of her cheeks. Although the sun was hot, she would not bother with a hat, and Bob, too, was bareheaded. They looked what they were—a healthy, happy, wide-awake American boy and girl and ready for either adventure or service, or a mixture of both, and reasonably sure to call whatever might befall them "fun".

"Why don't we go to that north section Dave Thorne is always talking about?" suggested Bob. "He is forever harping on the subject of a fire there, and I'd like to look it over."

"But it must be five miles from here," said Betty doubtfully. "Can we get back in time for dinner?"

"If we can't, we'll get some one of the Chinese cooks to give us a lunch," returned Bob confidently. "Let's go, Betty. I know the way, because I studied the map Uncle Dick had out on the table night before last. The north section is shut off from the others, and it's backed up against the furthest end of that perfect forest of derricks

we saw the first time we went to Uncle Dick's wells—remember? I think that is what worries Dave—some of those small holders have tempers like porcupines and they always think some one is infringing on their rights. Let one of 'em get mad and take it out on Dave, and there might be a four-alarm fire without much trouble."

"Do you know what I miss more than anything else?" asked Betty, when the horses' heads were turned and they were on their way to the north section. "You'll never guess—ice-cream soda! I haven't had one for weeks—not since we left Chicago."

"And I guess it will be some more weeks before you get another," said Bob. "Ice doesn't seem to be known out here, does it? Did you see how the butter swam about under that hot kitchen lamp last night? We used to think the Peabodys were stingy because they wouldn't use butter, but I'd rather have none than have it so soft."

They reached the north section and found Dave Thorne directing the drilling of a well which he told them was expected to "come in" that morning.

"Bob, I wonder if you'd do an errand for me?" he inquired. "I have to go back to the pumping station, and I want to send a record book back to one of the men here. Will you ride back with me and get the book? Betty will be all right, and

she'll get a chance to see the well come in. MacDuffy will look after her."

Bob, of course, was glad to do Dave a service, and the old Scotchman, MacDuffy, promised to see that Betty did not get into any danger.

"You'll like to see the well shot off," he told her pleasantly. " 'Tis a bonny sight, seen for the first time. The wee horse is not afraid? That is gude, then. Rein in here and keep your eye on that crowd of men. When they run you'll know the time has come."

Obediently Betty sat her horse and fixed her gaze on the small group of men who were moving about with more than ordinary quickness and a trace of excitement. There is always the hope that a well will "come in big" and offer substantial payment for the weeks of hard work and toil expended on it.

Suddenly the group scattered. Involuntarily Betty's hand tightened on Clover's rein. For a moment nothing happened. Then came a roar and a mighty rumble and the earth seemed to strain and crack.

CHAPTER XIII

THE THREE HILLS

BETTY saw an upheaval of sand, followed by a column of oil, heard a shout of victory from the men, and then Clover, who had been shivering with apprehension, snorted loudly, took the bit between her teeth and began to run. MacDuffy, resting securely in the assurance Betty had given that the horse would not be frightened, was occupied with the men, and horse and rider were rapidly disappearing from sight before he realized what had happened.

"Clover, Clover!" Betty put her arms around the maddened creature's neck and spoke to her softly. "It's all right, dear. Don't be afraid. I thought you had been brought up in an oil country, or I wouldn't have let vou stand where you could see the well."

But Clover's nerves had been sadly shaken, and she was not yet in a state to listen to reason. Betty was now an excellent horsewoman, and had no difficulty in remaining in the saddle. She did not try to pull the horse in, rather suspecting that the animal had a hard mouth, but let

the reins lie loosely on her neck, speaking reassuringly from time to time. Gradually Clover slackened her wild lope, dropped to a gentle gallop, and then into a canter and from that to a walk.

"Well, now, you silly horse, I hope you feel that you're far enough from danger," said Betty conversationally. "I'm sure I haven't the slightest idea where we are. Bob and I have never ridden this far, and from the looks of the country I don't think it is what the geographies call 'densely populated'. Mercy, what a lonesome place!"

Clover had gone contentedly to cropping grass, and that reminded Betty that she was hungry.

Far away she saw the outlines of oil derricks, but the horse seemed to have taken her out of the immediate vicinity of the oil fields. Not a house was in sight, not a moving person or animal. The stillness was unbroken save for the hoarse call of a single bird flying overhead.

Suddenly Betty's eyes widened in astonishment. She jerked up Clover's head so sharply that that pampered pet shook it angrily. Why should she be treated like that?

"The three hills!" gasped Betty. "Grandma Watterby's three hills! 'Joined together like hands' she always says, and right back of the

Saunders' house. Clover! do you suppose we've found the three hills and Bob's aunts?"

Clover had no opinion to offer. She had been rudely torn from her enjoyment of the herbage, and she resented that plainly. Betty, however, was too excited to consider the subject of lunch, even though a moment before she had been very hungry.

She turned the horse's head toward the three hills, and with every step that brought her nearer the conviction grew that she had found the Saunders' place. To be sure, she had seen nothing of a house as yet, but, like the name of Saunders, three hills were not a common phenomenon in Oklahoma, at least not within riding distance of the oil fields.

"It's an awful long way," sighed Betty, when after half an hour's riding, the hills seemed as far away as before. "I suppose the air is so clear that they seemed nearer than they are. And I guess we came the long way around. There must be a road from the Watterby farm that cuts off some of the distance."

Betty did not worry about what Bob or the men at the wells might be thinking. They knew her for a good rider, and Clover for a comparatively easily managed horse. No one in the West considers a good gallop anything serious, even when it assumes the proportions of a runaway.

Betty was sure that they would expect her to ride back when Clover had had her run, and, barring a misstep, no harm would be likely to befall the rider.

After a full hour and a half of steady going, the three hills obligingly moved perceptibly nearer. Betty could see the ribbon of road that lay at their base, and the outline of a rambling farmhouse.

"Grandma Watterby said the hills were right back of the house!" repeated Betty ecstatically. "Oh, I'm sure this must be the place. If only Bob had come with me!"

She laughed a little at the notion of such an accommodating runaway, and then pulled Clover up short as they came to a rickety fence that apparently marked the boundary line of a field.

"We go straight across this field to the road, I think," said Betty aloud. "I don't believe there is anything planted. Clover, can you jump that fence?"

The fence was not very high, and at the word Clover gracefully cleared it. The field was a tangled mass of corn stubble and weeds, and a good farmer would have known that it had not been under cultivation that year. At the further side Betty found a pair of bars, and, taking these down, found herself in a narrow, deserted road, facing a lonely farmhouse.

The house was set back several yards from the road and even to the casual observer presented a melancholy picture. The paint was peeling from the clapboards, leaders were hanging in rusty shreds, and the fence post to which Betty tied her horse was rotten and worm-eaten.

"My goodness, I'm afraid the aunts are awfully poor," sighed Betty, who had cherished a dream that Bob might find his relatives rich and ready to help him toward the education he so ardently desired. "Even Bramble Farm didn't look as bad as this."

She went up the weedy path to the house, and then for the first time noticed that all the shades were drawn and the doors and windows closed. It was a warm day and there was every reason for having all the fresh air that could be obtained.

"They must be away from home!" thought Betty. "Or—doesn't anybody live here?"

A cackle from the hen yard answered her question and put her mind at ease. Where there were chickens, there would be people as a matter of course. They might have gone away to spend the day.

"I'll take Clover out to the barn and give her a drink of water," decided Betty. "No one would mind that. Grandma Watterby says a farmer's barn is always open to his neighbor's stock."

So, Clover's bridle over her arm, Betty proceeded out to the barnyard.

"Why—how funny!" she gasped.

The unearthly stillness which had reigned was broken at her approach by the neighing of a horse, and at the sound the chickens began to beat madly against the wire fencing of their yard, cows set up a bellowing, and a wild grunting came from the pig-pen.

Betty hurried to the barn. Three cows in their stanchions turned imploring eyes on her, and a couple of old horses neighed loudly. Something prompted Betty to look in the feed boxes. They were empty.

"I believe they're hungry!" she exclaimed. "Clover, I don't believe they've been fed or watered for several days! They wouldn't act like this if they had."

There wasn't a drop of water anywhere in or about the barn, and a hasty investigation of the pig troughs and the drinking vessels in the chicken yard showed the same state of affairs.

"I don't know how much to feed you," Betty told the suffering animals compassionately, "but at any rate I know *what* to feed you. And you shall have some water as fast as I can pump it."

She was thankful for the weeks spent at Bramble Farm as she set about her heavy tasks. She was tired from her long ride and the excitement

of the morning, but it never entered her head to go away and leave the neglected farm stock. There was no other house within sight where she could go for help, and if the animals were fed and watered that day it was evidently up to her to do it.

She worked valiantly, heaping the horses' mangers with hay, carrying cornstalks to the cows and feeding the ravenous pigs and chickens corn on the cob, for there was no time to run the sheller. She had some difficulty in discovering the supplies, and then, when all were served, she discovered that not one of the animals had touched the food.

"Too thirsty," she commented wisely.

Watering them was hard, tiresome work, for one big tub in the center of the yard evidently served the whole barn. When she had pumped that full—and how her arms ached!—she led the horses out, and after them, the cows. She was afraid to let either horses or cows have all they wanted, and jerking them back to their stalls before they had finished was not easy. She carried pailful after pailful of water to the pigs and the chickens and it was late in the afternoon before she had the satisfaction of knowing that every animal, if not content, was much more comfortable than before her arrival.

"Now I think I've earned something to eat!"

she confided to Clover, when, hot and tired and flushed with the heat, she had filled the last chicken yard pan. "And I'm going up to the house and help myself from the pantry. I'm 'most sure the kitchen door is unlocked; no one around here ever locks the back door."

She was very hungry by this time, having had nothing since an early breakfast, and she had no scruples about helping herself to whatever edibles she might find.

"I begin to sympathize with all the hired men," she thought, making her way to the kitchen door. "I don't wonder they eat huge meals when they have to do such hard work."

The door, as she had expected, was not locked. A slight turn on the knob opened it easily, and Betty stepped cautiously into the kitchen. The drawn shades made it dark, but it was not the darkness that caused Betty to jump back a step.

She listened intently. Would she hear the noise again, or had it been only her nervous imagination?

No—there it was again, plain and unmistakable. Some one had groaned!

CHAPTER XIV

TWO INVALIDS

BETTY, for a single wild instant, had an impulse to slam the door shut and gallop off the place on Clover. She was all alone, and miles from help of any sort, no matter what happened. Then, as another groan sounded, she bravely made up her mind to investigate. Some one was evidently sick and in pain; that explained the state of affairs at the barns. Could she, Betty Gordon, run away and leave a sick person without attempting to find out what was needed?

It must be confessed that it took a great deal of courage to pull open the grained oak door that led from the kitchen and behind which the groans were sounding with monotonous regularity, but the girl set her teeth, and opened it softly. In the semi-darkness she was able to make out the dim outlines of a bed set between the two windows and a swirl of bedclothes, some of which were dragging on the floor.

"I'm just Betty," she quavered uncertainly, for though the groans had stopped no one spoke. "I

heard you groaning. Are you sick, and is there anything I can do for you?"

"Sick," murmured a woman's voice. "So sick!"

At the sound of utter weariness and pain, Betty's fear left her and all the tenderness and passionate desire for service that had made her such a wonderful little "hand" with ill and fretful babies in her old home at Pineville came to take its place.

"I'll have to put the shades up," she explained, stepping lightly to the windows and pulling up the green shades. "Then I can see to make you more comfortable."

She spoke clearly and yet not loudly, knowing that a sick person hates whispering.

The afternoon sunlight streamed into the room, revealing a clean though most sparsely furnished bedroom. A rag rug on the floor, two chairs, a washstand and mirror and the bed were the only articles of furniture.

Betty, after one swift glance, turned toward the occupant of the bed. She saw a woman apparently about sixty years old, with mild blue eyes, now glazed by fever, and tangled gray hair. As Betty watched her a terrible fit of coughing shook her.

"You must have a doctor!" said Betty decidedly, wondering what there was about the woman that seemed familiar. "How long have you been

like this? Have you been alone? How hard it must have been for you!"

She put out her hand to smooth the bedclothes, and the sick woman grasped it, her own hot with fever, till Betty almost cried out.

"The stock!" she gasped. "I took 'em water till I couldn't get out of bed. How long ago was that? They will die tied up!"

"I fed and watered them," Betty soothed her. "They're all right. Don't worry another minute. I'll make you tidy and get you something to eat and then I'm going for a doctor."

What was there about the woman—Betty stared at her, frowning in an effort to recollect where she had seen her before. If Bob were only here to help her—Bob! Why, the sick woman before her was the living image of Bob Henderson!

"The Saunders place!" Betty clapped her hand to her mouth, anxious not to excite her patient. "Why, of course, this is the farm. And she must be one of Bob's aunts!"

As if in answer to her question, the sick woman half rose in bed.

"Charity!" she stammered, her hands pressed to her aching head. "Charity! She was sick first."

She pointed to an adjoining room and Betty crossed the floor feeling that she was walking

in a dream and likely to wake up any minute.

The communicating room was shrouded in darkness like the other, and when Betty had raised the shades she found it furnished as another bedroom. Evidently the old sisters had chosen to live entirely on the first floor of the house.

The woman in the square iron bed looked startlingly like Bob, too, but, unlike her sister, her eyes were dark. She lay quietly, her cheeks scarlet and her hands nervously picking at the counterpane. When she saw Betty she struggled to a sitting posture and tried to talk. It was pitiable to watch her efforts for her voice was quite gone. Only when Betty put her ear close down to the trembling lips could she hear the words.

"Hope!" murmured the sick woman hoarsely. "Hope—have you seen her?"

"Yes, she asked for you, too." Betty tried to nod brightly. "I'm going to do a few things here first and get you both something to eat, and then I'm going for a doctor."

Miss Charity sank back, evidently satisfied, and Betty hurried out to the kitchen. The woodbox was well-filled and she had little difficulty in starting a fire in the stove. Like the rest of the farm homes, the only available water supply seemed to be the pump in the yard, and Betty

pumped vigorously, letting a stream run out before she filled the teakettle. She thought it likely that no water had been pumped for several days.

There was plenty of food in the house, though not a great variety, and mostly canned goods at that. Betty, who by this time was really faint with hunger, made a hasty lunch from crackers and some cheese before she carried a basin of warm water in to the two patients and sponged their faces and hands. She wanted to put clean sheets on the beds, but wisely decided that was too much of an undertaking for an inexperienced nurse and contented herself with straightening the bedclothes and putting on a clean counterpane from the scanty little pile of linen in a bottom drawer of the washstand in Miss Hope's room. She was slightly delirious for brief intervals, but was able to tell Betty where many things were. Neither of the sisters seemed at all surprised to see the girl, and, if they were able to reason at all, probably thought she was a neighbor's daughter.

When Betty had the two rooms arranged a bit more tidily, and she was anxious to leave them looking presentable for she planned to send the doctor on ahead while she found Bob and brought him out with her, she brushed and braided her patients' hair smoothly, and then

fed them a very little warm milk. Neither seemed at all hungry, and Betty was thankful, for she did not know what food they should have, and she longed for a physician to take the responsibility. She had given each a drink of cool water before she did anything else, knowing that they must be terribly thirsty.

She stood in the doorway where she could be seen from both beds when she had done everything she could, and the two sisters, if not better, were much more comfortable than she had found them.

"Now," she said, "I'm going to get a doctor. No, I won't leave you all alone—not for long," she added hastily, for Miss Charity was gazing at her imploringly and Miss Hope's eyes were full of tears. "I'll come back and stay all night and as long as you need me. But I must get some things and I must tell the Watterbys where I am. I'll hurry as fast as I can."

She ran out and saddled Clover, for she had been turned out to grass to enjoy a good rest, and, having got the proper direction from Miss Hope, urged her up the road at a smart canter. She knew where the Flame City doctor lived; that is, the country doctor who had practised long before the town was the oil center it was now. There were good medical men at the oil fields, but Betty knew that they were liable to be in any

section and difficult to find. She trusted that Doctor Morrison would be at home.

He lived about two miles out of the town and a mile from the Watterby farm, and, as good luck would have it, he had come in from a hard case at dinner time, taken a nap, and was comfortably reading a magazine on his side porch when Betty wheeled into the yard. She knew him, having met him one day at the oil wells, and when she explained the need for him, he said that he would snatch a bit of supper and go immediately in his car.

"I know these two Saunders sisters," he said briefly. "They've lived alone for years, and now they're getting queer. It's a mercy they ever got through last winter without a case of pneumonia. Both of 'em down, you say? And impossible to get a nurse or a housekeeper for love or money."

"Oh, I'm going back," explained Betty quickly. "They need some one to wait on them. Uncle Dick will let me, I know, and I really know quite a lot about taking care of sick people, Doctor Morrison."

"But you can't stay there alone," objected the doctor. "Why, child, I wouldn't think of it. Some one will come along and carry you off."

"Bob will come and stay, too," declared Betty confidently. "There are horses and cows to take

care of, you know. I found them nearly dead of thirst, and all tied in their stalls."

The doctor interrupted impatiently.

"Nice country we live in!" he muttered bitterly. "Every last man so bent on making money in oil he'd let his neighbor die under his very eyes. Here are two old women sick, and no one to lift a hand for 'em. I suppose they haven't been able to get a hired man to tend to the stock since the oil boom struck Flame City. Well, child, I don't see that I have much choice in the matter. I know as well as you do, that they must have some one to help out for a few days. That Henderson lad looks capable, and you'll be safe, as far as that goes, with him in the house. But you musn't try to do too much, and, above all, no lifting. I'll keep an eye on you."

The doctor offered to take Betty back with him in the car but she was anxious that he should not be delayed and asked him to go as soon as he could. She herself would ride on to the Watterby farm, see if Bob was there, get her supper, and pack a few necessary things in a small bag. Then she and Bob would ride back to the Saunders place. Clover was fresh enough now, after her respite, far fresher than Betty, who was more tired than she had ever been in her life, though nothing would have dragged that confession from her. Of course her uncle must be notified, if he

were not at the farm. Betty knew that a message left with the Watterbys would reach him. He had been off for four days, and was expected home very soon.

Betty did not hurry Clover, for she wanted to save her for that evening's trip, and it was well on toward six o'clock before she came in sight of the farm. A black dot resolved itself into Bob and he came running to meet her.

"I was beginning to worry about you," he called. "I waited up at the fields till afternoon, because Thorne was sure you would come back there. When I got here and found you hadn't come in, I was half afraid the horse had thrown you. You look done up, Betty; are you hurt?"

"I'm all right," said Betty carelessly, dismounting. "Have you heard from Uncle Dick?"

Bob did not answer, and she turned in surprise to look at him. His face was rather white under the tan, and his hands, fumbling with the reins, were trembling.

CHAPTER XV

UNEXPECTED NEWS

"Bob!" Betty's over-tired nerves seemed to jangle like tangled wires. "Bob, is anything the matter?"

"Well, of course, nothing is really the matter," replied Bob, his assumed calmness belied by his excited face. "Nothing that need worry you, Betty. But—there's another oil fire!"

"Another well on fire?" repeated Betty. "Oh, Bob, is it anywhere near Uncle Dick?"

"You come in and sit down. Ki will look after Clover," said Bob authoritatively. "Supper is almost ready, and I'll tell you all I know. Mrs. Watterby has gone to bed with a sick headache, but Grandma is taking her place."

"Is it a very bad fire?" urged Betty. "Where is it? When did it start? Have you seen it?"

"I guess it is pretty bad," said Bob soberly. "It's the north section, Betty. Just what Thorne has been afraid of."

"The north section!" Betty looked startled. "But, Bob, we were there this morning. Everything was all right."

"Well, when I came back with the record book Thorne sent me with and found you and Clover had dashed off, everything was all right, too. I hung round for an hour or so, hoping you'd ride back, and then MacDuffy asked me to take a message to Thorne. They were having dinner at the mess house, and Uncle Dick came in before we had finished. He was feeling great over some leases they'd signed that morning, and he thought he'd get home to-night. He didn't seem to worry about you—said he knew Clover was a sensible and well-broken horse and that he guessed you'd come out none the worse for wear. Somebody called Thorne outside just as the Chink brought in the pie, and he was back in a few minutes, looking as if the bottom had dropped out of the world.

" 'Two wells afire in the north section, Mr. Gordon,' he said, and at that every man shot from the table out into the air. We could just see the two thin spirals of smoke—that section must be four miles from the bunk house.

"Everybody ran for their horses, and Uncle Dick for his car. He cranked it and then saw me getting in with him.

" 'You go back and stay with Betty,' he cried to me. 'Stay with her every minute till I come back. If I'm gone three hours or three days or three years, don't leave her. And keep her away

from the oil fields. We'll be overrun as soon as news of this gets out, and the kind of crowd that will be here is no place for a girl. Promise me, Bob.'

"So of course I promised," concluded the lad earnestly. "He got into the car, and maybe he didn't make that tin trap speed. All I saw was a cloud of dust. This afternoon all of Flame City has gone past here on foot, in cars, and on horseback. They say more wells have caught."

"Do you think Uncle Dick is in danger?" faltered Betty. "Aren't the fire fighters surrounded sometimes and suffocated with smoke?"

"What have you been reading?" demanded Bob with a stoutness he was far from feeling. "Uncle Dick knows too much to be caught like that. No, he may not get home for a couple of days more, but there is no need for you to lie awake and worry. Take my advice and go to bed the minute you've had supper; you look tired to death, Betty."

"Oh, Bob!" For the moment Betty had actually forgotten her great news, but now it came rushing back to her. "Oh, Bob, I've something wonderful to tell you!"

"Won't listen till you've had your supper," said Bob firmly, marching her out to the dining-room table, as Grandma Watterby rang the bell. "You eat first, then you can talk."

Betty could hardly touch her food for excitement, but she did not want the Prices to hear what she had to tell Bob, so she made a pretense of eating. The Watterby household was eager to hear what had happened to her on her unplanned-for ride, and she told them that Clover had taken her some miles before she could be halted. She did not go into details.

"Now, Bob!" She fairly dragged him from the supper table, ignoring his suggestion that they help Grandma Watterby wash the dishes. "I can't wait another minute, not even to help Grandma. I have something to tell you, and you simply must listen. I've found your aunts!"

Bob stared at her stupidly.

"I found the three hills!" Betty hurried on excitedly. "Clover carried me ever so far, and I saw the three hills in the distance. I had to ride miles before I reached them, but it isn't more than seven or eight by the road. And, Bob, both your aunts are very sick, and they have no one to take care of them or get them anything to eat. There aren't any neighbors around here, you know; all the women are too old or too busy like Mrs. Watterby, and the men are crazy about oil. You and I have to go there to-night."

"Betty, are you sure you are not crazy?" demanded Bob uneasily. "How do you know they

are my aunts? How can we go there and stay? They must need a doctor."

Betty was impatient of explanations, but she saw that Bob was genuinely bewildered, so she hastily sketched the proceedings of the afternoon for him.

"And Doctor Morrison must be there now," she wound up triumphantly. "They look so much like you, Bob. He'll see it, too."

"I never saw any one like you, Betty!" Bob gazed at her in undisguised admiration. "No wonder you look tired. Why, I should think you'd be ready to drop. Hadn't you better go to bed and get a good night's sleep and let me go out to the farm? You can come to-morrow morning."

"I'm rested now," insisted Betty. "That hot supper made me feel all right again. Doctor Morrison will probably have some directions for me, and I promised the old ladies I'd be back and you promised Uncle Dick not to leave me. Let's go and tell Grandma and leave word with her for Uncle Dick. Then you saddle up, and I'll get my bag."

Bob forbore to argue further, more because he thought that it was best to get Betty away from the Watterby place on the main road to Flame City than because he approved of her taking another long ride after an exhausting day.

The most disquieting rumors had come down from the fields that afternoon, and Bob knew that every kind of story, authentic and unfounded, would be promptly retailed over the Watterby gate. If Mr. Gordon's life were in danger, and Bob feared it was, it would be agony for Betty to be unable to go to him and be forced to listen to hectic accounts of the fire.

"Well, well," said Grandma Watterby, when Betty told her that she had found the Saunders place. "So you rode to the three hills, did you? Ain't they pretty? Many and many's the time I've seen 'em. And Bob's aunties—Hope and Charity—they living there?"

Betty explained briefly that they were ill and that she and Bob were going to look after things.

"We may be gone two or three days or a week," she said. "You tell Uncle Dick where we are if he comes, won't you? Doctor Morrison will bring messages if you ask him. He's going to see them, too."

Grandma Watterby hurried to the pantry and came back with a glass jar in her hands.

"This is some o' my home-made beef extract," she told them. "You take it with you, Betty. There ain't nothing better for building up a sick person. Dear, dear, to think of you finding Hope and Charity Saunders. Do they know 'bout Bob?"

Betty said no, and the horses being brought round by Ki, who had insisted on saddling them, she and Bob rode off. It was faintly dusk, and a new moon hung low in the sky.

"Isn't it lovely?" sighed Betty. "In spite of sickness and danger and selfish people, I love this country on an evening like this. What do you think we ought to do about telling your aunts, Bob? I knew Grandma would ask that question."

"Why, if they're sick, I think it would be utterly foolish to mention a nephew to 'em," said Bob cheerfully. "They probably are blissfully unaware that I'm alive, and trying to explain to them would likely bring on an attack of brain fever. I'm just a neighbor dropped in to help while they're laid up."

Betty could not bring herself to speak of the evident poverty of the lonely Saunders home. She had built so many bright castles for Bob, and the dilapidated house and buildings she had left that afternoon quite failed to fit into any of the pictures. However, she remembered happily, there was always the prospect of oil.

"It can't be out of the fields," she argued to herself. "Just suppose oil should be discovered in that section! Bob might easily be a millionaire!"

Bob was silent, too, but his thoughts were not

on a problematical fortune. He was wondering, with a quickened beating of his heart, how his mother's sisters would look and whether he should be able to see in them anything of the girlish face in the long-treasured little picture that was one of the few valuables in the black tin box.

"There's a team ahead," said Betty suddenly.

Her quick ears had caught the sound of wheels, and though it was almost dark now, no lantern was lit on the rattling buggy to which they presently caught up. The rig made such a noise, added to the breathing of the bony horse that was suffering from a bad case of that malady popularly known among farmers as "the heaves," that the occupants were forced to raise their voices to make themselves heard. The top was up and it was impossible to see who was inside.

"I tell you, let me handle it, and I'll make you thousands," some one was saying as they passed the buggy single file. "I can manage women and their money, and I don't believe the idea of oil has as much as entered their heads."

"Always oil," thought Bob, hurrying his horse to catch up with Betty. "In Oklahoma the stuff that dreams are made of comes up through an iron derrick, that's sure."

At the Saunders place, bathed in faint moonlight, they found Doctor Morrison's car, and a

light in the window told that he was waiting for them.

"Didn't know whether you would make it to-night or not," was his greeting, as they went around to the kitchen door and he opened it to show the room brightly lighted by two lamps. "Both patients are asleep. Miss Charity has laryngitis and Miss Hope a very heavy cold. But I think the worst is over."

He stopped, and shot a keen glance at Bob.

"Funny," he said abruptly. "For the moment I would have said you looked enough like Miss Hope to have been her younger brother."

Bob merely smiled at the doctor's remark, for he did not want the relationship to be guessed before his aunts had recognized him.

CHAPTER XVI

HOUSEKEEPER AND NURSE

"I MUST be going on," Doctor Morrison continued, finishing his writing at the kitchen table which the entrance of Bob and Betty had evidently interrupted. "Here are a few directions for you, Betty. I do not think there will be anything for you to do to-night. Both should sleep right through, and I'll be out in the morning. I have made a bed for you on the parlor sofa, and one for Bob here in the kitchen. I thought you'd want to be near the patients. And, then, too, the rooms upstairs are damp and musty; evidently the upper floor of the house hasn't been used for some time. Now are you sure you will be all right? Does Mr. Gordon know you are here?"

Bob explained that they had left a message for Mr. Gordon at the Watterby farm, and Doctor Morrison, who of course knew of the fire, nodded understandingly. Then he bade them good-night, promising to make them his first call in the morning.

"I'll go out and bed down the horses and feed

the stock," said Bob, after the light of the doctor's car had disappeared down the road. "Do go to bed, Betty; you're all tuckered out."

But Betty flatly refused to stay in the house without Bob. She tagged sleepily after him while he carried water to the horses and cows, bedded them down and littered the pig pens with fresh straw. He bolted the doors of the barns and hen house and made everything snug for the night. Then he and Betty went back to the house, having stabled their own horses in two empty stalls that, judging from the dusty hay in the mangers, had not been used recently.

Both patients were sleeping, breathing rather heavily and hoarsely, it is true, but apparently resting comfortably. Betty and Bob were thoroughly tired out and glad to say good-night and go to bed. As Betty snuggled down on the comfortable old couch, she thought how kind of the doctor to have made things ready for them.

The sun streaming in through the windows woke her the next morning. With a start she jumped up and put on her slippers and blue robe. With the healthy vigor of youth she had slept without once waking during the night, and not once had the thought of her patients disturbed her. Cautiously she tiptoed into the two bedrooms. Miss Charity and Miss Hope were sleeping quietly. A swift peep into the kitchen

showed her a fire snapping briskly in the stove and the teakettle sending out clouds of steam. Bob was nowhere in sight.

"He's out at the barn," thought Betty. "I must hurry and get breakfast."

She dressed quickly but trimly, as usual, and raised the windows of the parlor. Screens or not, she felt the house would be the better for quantities of fresh air. She closed the door softly and went down the narrow little passage into the kitchen.

She found a bowl of nice-looking eggs in the pantry and a piece of home-cured bacon neatly sewed into a white muslin bag and partly sliced. This, with slices of golden brown toast—the bread box held only half a loaf of decidedly stale bread—solved her breakfast menu. There were two pans of milk standing on the table, thick with yellow cream, and Betty was just wondering if Bob had milked and when, for the cream could not have risen under two or three hours' time, when the boy came whistling cheerfully in, carrying a pail of foaming milk.

"Sh!" warned Betty. "Don't wake your aunts up. When did you milk, Bob? You can't have done it twice in one morning."

"Well hardly," admitted Bob, lowering his voice discreetly. "I went out last night after I was sure you were asleep. I knew the cows had to be

milked and that you'd probably insist on staying out there if you went to sleep standing up. So I took a lantern I found under the bench on the back porch and went out about an hour after you went to bed. Gee, fried eggs and bacon! You're a good cook, Betsey!"

Betty had spread one end of the table with a clean brown linen cloth, and now, after Bob had washed his hands and she had strained the milk, she placed the smoking hot dishes before him, and they proceeded to enjoy the meal heartily.

"I wonder if the fire is out," said Betty anxiously. "Perhaps Doctor Morrison will know when he comes. What are you going to do now, Bob?"

"You tell me what will help you," answered Bob. "I suppose you have to cook breakfast for the aunts—doesn't that sound funny? I thought I'd kind of hang around the house—you might want furniture moved or something like that—till you had 'em all fixed comfy, and then you could go out to the barn with me while I finished out there. It's lonesome in a new place."

"Sometimes I think," announced Betty, stopping with the frying pan in her hand and beaming upon Bob, "that you have more sense than any one I ever knew. You needn't do a thing, if you'll just wait for me. There's a pile of old

magazines in the parlor. You can read the stories in those."

Leaving Bob comfortably established in a padded rocking chair, she went in to see if either of her patients was awake. Both were, as it happened, and though they looked slightly bewildered at first, Betty soon recalled to their minds her coming and the visit from the doctor. Both were very weak, and Miss Charity still was voiceless, but their eyes were clear and there was no sign of delirium.

Betty had brought an enveloping white apron and cap with her, and she presented an immaculate little figure as she gently sponged the hands and faces of the old ladies and made their beds tidy and smooth. Doctor Morrison had ordered water toast and weak tea for their breakfast, and when Betty went out to the kitchen to prepare two trays she found that Bob had pumped two pails of fresh water, cleared the table and stacked the dishes in the dishpan and was taking up ashes from the stove while he waited for the kettle of water which he had put on for them to heat.

"I thought you'd need the teakettle yourself," observed this energetic young man, a streak of soot across his forehead in no way detracting from his engaging smile. "I'll have to put in an hour or so chopping wood this afternoon. The box will be empty by noon."

Betty found that both her patients were too weak to feed themselves, so she had to handle one tray at a time. The meal was barely over when Doctor Morrison drove up. He found Bob washing dishes and Betty drying them.

"Well, well, you look as bright as two dollars," said the gray old doctor merrily. "You don't need any prescriptions, that's evident. How are the sick ladies, Miss Nurse?"

"They slept all night—at least, I think they did," she reported conscientiously. "I never woke up, and I think I would have heard them call, for the door from the parlor was left open and their doors too, of course. They slept about an hour and a half after Bob and I were up and about. But they are very weak. I had to feed them."

"That's to be expected," said the doctor professionally. "We'll go in and see how the fever is. I don't suppose they've seen Bob?"

Betty shook her head.

"I thought the fewer people they saw the better," she answered quietly. "Miss Hope was afraid I was doing too much and I told her a boy was here looking after the barns and the stock. That seemed to satisfy her."

"Well, for two youngsters, I must say you show extraordinary good sense," the doctor said.

"I don't know what these old ladies would have done if you hadn't taken hold."

He wanted Betty to go with him to the sick-rooms, and at his first glance pronounced Miss Hope better. Miss Charity, too, was much improved, but she struggled against the throat spray and was exhausted when the treatment was finished.

"They'll build up, but slowly," declared the doctor when he and Betty and Bob were again together in the kitchen. "I think it is safe to say that they'll sleep nearly all day. Keep them warm and on a light diet—here is a better list than the one I scribbled last night—and be careful of yourself, Betty. I'm having some supplies sent out to you. I took a look at the pantry last night before you came, and the old ladies have been living on what the farm produced; if it didn't produce what they needed, they evidently went without. I'm afraid they're desperately poor and proud. What's that? Grandma Watterby's beef extract? Fine! Just what you need! Give 'em some for supper. Well, Betty, out with it—don't ask a question with your eyes; use your tongue."

"The fire?" stammered Betty. "Is it out? Have you heard anything?"

"Still burning," was the reluctant answer. "About all the town spent the night up there,

hampering the employees I haven't a doubt and thinking they were helping the force. However, don't worry, child; I honestly believe that Mr. Gordon is in no danger. He is intelligent and careful, and the company will sacrifice the whole field before they will let a man risk his life."

Doctor Morrison was to come the next day, and some hours after he left them a rickety oil-field wagon drove up and left a box of groceries. The boy driving the sleek mule was in a great hurry "to see the fire," and he merely tumbled the box off and drove on with hardly an unnecessary word.

"Goodness, the doctor seems to expect us to stay a month!" gasped Betty, unpacking the tin cans and packages. "It's almost as much fun as keeping a store, isn't it, Bob? Oh, my gracious! what was that?"

A cry had sounded from Miss Hope's bedroom.

Bob and Betty ran to the door. She was sitting up in bed, her bright, hot eyes staring at them unseeingly.

"Faith!" she cried piercingly. "Faith, my darling!"

CHAPTER XVII

SICK FANCIES

BETTY turned to stare at Bob. He looked at her helplessly.

"My mother!" he whispered. "She's calling my mother!"

Betty was the first to recover. She went quietly over to the bed.

"There, dear, lie down," she said soothingly. "Everything is all right. It's the fever," she explained in an aside to Bob. "The doctor said she used to be out of her head when she had even a slight cold."

"Faith!" cried Miss Hope again, resisting Betty's attempts to press her back against the pillow. "I wrote and wrote," the hoarse voice babbled on. "You and David are so cruel—you will never send us word. David!" she sat up straighter and pointed an accusing finger at Bob standing in the doorway. "David! Faith and David——"

"You're making her worse," said Betty. "Go away, please, Bob. See, she'll lie down now."

Exhausted, Miss Hope sank back on her pillow, and suddenly the delirium left her.

"You're very good to me, my dear," she whispered weakly. "I think I'll go to sleep."

Betty watched her for a few minutes till her even breathing told that she really was asleep. Then she went in to see if Miss Charity had been disturbed. She was awake and beckoned for Betty to come nearer the bed.

"Was Faith here?" she whispered painfully. Betty had to put her ear down to her mouth to hear. "Has she come at last?"

Betty shook her head sorrowfully. She had hoped the sick woman's voice had not reached her sister.

"Miss Hope had more fever," she said compassionately. "She has gone to sleep now. If I bring you a little nice beef tea, don't you think you might take a nap, too?"

The old lady was childishly pleased with the idea of something to eat again, and Betty fixed her tray daintily and toasted a cracker to go with the cup of really delicious home-made beef tea. Miss Charity drank every drop, and fifteen minutes later Betty had the satisfaction of seeing her go to sleep.

Bob was out on the back porch, whittling furiously, a sure sign that he was disturbed.

"They're my aunts, all right," he began, as

soon as Betty appeared. "I couldn't be quite sure, in spite of the name and the coincidences, but now I know it. Do you think I look like them, Betty?"

"You look an awful lot like Miss Hope," said Betty. "You look like Miss Charity, too, but not nearly as much. Miss Hope has blue eyes, you see. You haven't seen Miss Charity yet, but her eyes are black. I'm sure they are your aunts, Bob."

"Well, if they ever needed a husky nephew they need him now," declared Bob whimsically. "I don't know how long they've been sick, but this place looks as though no one had cleaned it up in a year. The animals need currying, too."

"They haven't been able to hire any help, I suppose," said Betty. "And I don't believe you can get a hired man around here. The men are all working in the oil fields. Ki is mad at the oil investors, and that's the only reason Will Watterby can keep him."

"Are they both asleep?" asked Bob, whose mind skipped topics with amazing rapidity. "All right then, let's go out to the barn. Something tells me if you look around you'll get a basket of eggs."

They had great fun doing the work together, and both agreed that if they never thanked the Peabodys for another thing, they could say truth-

fully that they were thankful for the knowledge of farm work learned on Bramble Farm. Bob knew what to feed the animals, how to take care of them, and even what to do for a severe nail cut one of the cows had suffered. Betty gathered a basket of eggs with little hunting and also found several rat holes which Bob promptly attended to by nailing tin over them.

"We can't start in and repair the whole place," he said cheerfully. "But we'll do little jobs as fast as we come to them."

Both sisters were soundly sleeping when, the chores finished, Betty and Bob came back to the house. They had their lunch, and then Bob brought the dilapidated old lawn mower around to the back porch to see if he could put it in running order. Betty sat down near him, with the doors open so that she could hear the slightest movement within the house, and worked fitfully at her tatting. She was learning to make a pretty edge, under Grandma Watterby's instruction, but it did not progress very quickly, mainly because Betty was always going off for long rides, or playing somewhere outdoors.

"Look at that cloud of dust!" said Bob suddenly, glancing up from his tinkering. "Some one is going somewhere in a hurry. He's stopping. Why, Betty, it's Ed Manners!"

Manners was a Flame City youth, a lad of

about eighteen, and the son of the postmaster. Bob and Betty ran down to the road to see him as he stopped his motorcycle with skillful abruptness.

"Will Watterby told me you were out here," he called as soon as he saw Bob. "Say, two more wells caught last night, and they say it's absolutely the biggest fire we've ever had. The close drilling has made the trouble. Remember how Mr. Gordon used to rave over so many derricks on an acre? Don't you want to come with me, Bob? I'd take you, too, Betty, but it is no place for a girl."

Ed Manners waved an inviting hand towards the side-car. Bob was eager to go—what boy would not be?—and he knew that not to go would mean that he was missing something which in all probability he would never see again.

"Go ahead, Bob," urged Betty bravely. "I'll be all right. Honestly I will. If you don't get back to-night, why, Doctor Morrison will be out in the morning."

But Bob had made up his mind. He heard clearly again the final commands of Mr. Gordon, his Uncle Dick, for whom he would do far more than this.

"Can't go, Ed," he said briefly and finally. "Sorry, but it isn't to be thought of. Betty and I have a job cut out for us right here."

The lad on the motorcycle had no time to waste in arguing. He was eager to get to the scene of excitement, and if Bob chose to throw up a chance to see a spectacular fire, why, that was his business. With a loud snort and a series of back-fires, the machine shot up the road and in less than a minute was out of sight.

"I hope, oh, I hope that Uncle Dick is all right," worried Betty, walking back to the house. "You needn't have stayed with me, Bob. Still, of course, I'm glad you did. I might be a little nervous at night."

Bob thought it more than likely but all he said was that he wouldn't think of leaving her alone with two sick women and no telephone in the house.

"As soon as my aunts are well enough to hear the sad news that I'm their long-lost nephew," he said half in fun and half in earnest, "I intend to have a 'phone put in for them. It's outrageous to think of two women living isolated like this."

The afternoon passed rapidly, Bob getting his machine in running order and clipping a little square of lawn before supper time. Betty fed her patients again, and again they went to sleep. After an early supper Betty and Bob were glad to go to bed, too, and it seemed to the former that she had been asleep only a few moments

when something wakened her, and she sat up, startled.

The moonlight was streaming in at her windows, silvering the stiff, haircloth furniture and bathing the red and blue roses of the Brussels carpet in a radiance that softened the glaring colors and made them even beautiful. Betty was about to lie down and try to go to sleep again when a cry came from Miss Hope.

"Faith!" she moaned. "Faith, my dear little sister!"

Betty was out of bed in a second and pattering toward the sufferer's room. Bob, half-dressed, appeared at the door leading into the kitchen simultaneously.

"Don't let her see you," warned Betty. "I think that makes her worse. I wish I knew what to do when she gets these spells."

For some time Miss Hope rambled on about "Faith," and would not be persuaded to lie down. At last, after crying pitifully, she sank back on the pillow and the phantoms seemed to leave her poor brain. Like a child she dropped off into a deep sleep, and Bob and Betty were free to creep back to their rooms and try to compose their nerves. Miss Charity had slept peacefully through it all.

The doctor, told of Miss Hope's ravings, listened thoughtfully, but did not seem to attach

much importance to the recital. He had driven up early the following morning and brought the hopeful news that the fire was said to be under control.

"She's always had a tendency to be flighty in any illness," he said, speaking of Miss Hope's disorders. "Faith was a sister to whom she was greatly attached. A pretty girl who married and went away before I came here to practise. Miss Saunders told me once that from the time of her marriage to this, not a word of her ever reached them. She completely disappeared. Of course this has preyed on the minds of both sisters, and it's a wonder they haven't broken down before this."

Doctor Morrison stayed an hour or so, and praised Betty's nursing unstintedly. He said she seemed to know what to do instinctively and had that rare tact of the born nurse which teaches her how to avoid irritating her patients.

Both Betty and Bob felt that they had no right to explore the house, though they were interested to know what might be upstairs. Betty, especially, was anxious to see the attic. She pictured trunks filled with papers that might be of help and interest to Bob, and in her experience an attic never failed to reveal a history of the family.

She did find, in the parlor where she slept, an old album, and that afternoon brought it out

on the porch to show it to Bob. She hoped he might be able to recognize his mother among the tintypes and photographs. But as soon as she stepped outdoors she saw something which made her almost drop the precious old album and clutch Bob's arm wildly.

"Look who's coming in here!" she cried excitedly.

"Well, what do you know about that!" ejaculated the astonished Bob.

CHAPTER XVIII

STRANGE VISITORS

WALKING jauntily down the path which now, thanks to Bob, was neat and trim, came the two men who had aroused Bob's suspicions on the train, and whom he had followed into the smoking car. They were dressed as they had been then—gray suits, gray ties, socks and hats. The older man was mopping his face with a very white handkerchief, and his shorter companion was looking eagerly up at the house.

"I beg your pardon," said the one with gray hair—Bob remembered that he had been called Fluss—"is this the Saunders home—place, I believe the natives call it?"

He smiled at Betty, showing several gold teeth, and she shrank behind Bob and hid the album under her apron.

"Yes," answered Bob civilly. "This is the Saunders farm."

"We'd like to see," the younger man spoke crisply and consulted a small leather-bound notebook, "Miss Hope Saunders or her sister, Miss Charity. Please take her our cards."

He held out the two bits of pasteboard and Betty, looking over Bob's shoulder, was astonished to read, not "Cal Blosser" and "Jack Fluss," but "Irving Snead" and "George Elmer." Each card, in the lower left-hand corner, was lettered "The West Farm Agency."

Bob controlled whatever he was feeling, and handed back the cards very politely.

"My aunts are both very ill," he said courteously. "They are under the doctor's care, and it will be impossible for them to see any one for several weeks."

"But some one must be in charge," urged Blosser, or Irving Snead, as he seemed to prefer to be known. "Isn't there some older person about?"

"Miss Gordon and I"—Betty thought that had a very nice sound as Bob said it—"are taking care of them. It is hard to get help of any kind because of the demand for workers at the fields and in Flame City. If we can do anything for you——"

"You can't!" Fluss broke in sharply. "It's very annoying not to be able to see the Misses Saunders. We've come a good many miles, thinking this place might suit one of our customers. He has a delicate daughter, and he wants to get her out on a farm. This part of Oklahoma ought to be beneficial for lung trouble. I suppose the

old ladies would be willing to sell? The place is much run down and not worth much, but if our client should take a fancy to it, he would overlook the poor location and the condition of the buildings. Why not let us talk to your aunts just a few minutes? You may be the cause of their losing a sale."

"It is impossible for you to see them," repeated Bob. "They're in bed and have fever and great difficulty in talking at all. I'm sorry, but you can not see them to-day."

Blosser took out his handkerchief again and mopped his streaming face. Betty, who would be kind to any one in distress, had gone in for a glass of water and brought it out to him.

"Thank you, my dear," he murmured gratefully, gulping it down in one long swallow while Fluss shook his head impatiently in answer to Betty's mute interrogation. "My, that tasted good," Blosser added, handing back the glass. "I don't suppose you know whether your aunts want to sell?" he shot at Bob. "Must be kind of hard for them to run the farm all alone."

"Well, it was," admitted Bob, with a misleading air of confidence. "Hereafter, of course, they'll have me to help."

He did not know whether it would be wise to say any more or not; but he could not resist one thrust.

"I suppose in time they will sell," he observed carelessly. "The farm is sure to be bought up by some oil company."

Blosser and Fluss scowled darkly and looked at Bob with closer attention.

"I didn't know the old ladies had a nephew," said Fluss suspiciously. "Funny they didn't mention it when I was driving through here last spring, listing properties, eh?"

"I never knew my aunts to confide personal and private affairs to strangers," said Bob calmly.

Blosser turned on him angrily.

"You're fresh!" he snarled. "If you knew what was for your own good, you'd keep a civil tongue in your head. Come on—er—Elmer, we're wasting time with this kid. We'll come back and talk to the aunts."

Fluss still lingered. His gray eyes appraised Bob keenly and something in their steady, disconcerting stare made Betty uneasy.

"What's happened to the town?" demanded Fluss abruptly. "Couldn't find even the oldest inhabitant hanging around the station. Everybody gone to a funeral?"

"There's a big oil fire," returned Bob. "Four or five wells have been burning a couple of days now, though they say they have it under control."

The word "oil" roused Blosser again.

"There ain't no oil on this place," he announced heavily. "I've seen a lot of money sunk in dry wells, and what I don't know about the oil country ain't worth mentioning. Isn't that so, George? Traveling round to list farms as I do, I just naturally make a study of the sections. If ever I saw a poor risk, it's this place; there ain't an inch of oil sand on it."

Betty's hand on his arm telegraphed Bob not to argue.

"You may be right," the boy replied indifferently. "We won't quarrel over that."

There was nothing more to be said, and the two men turned away, Blosser putting the cards down on the step with the curt wish that "You'd hand those to your aunts and tell 'em we'll drop in again in a couple of days."

"Oh, I'm so glad they've gone!" Betty watched the retreating backs till they disappeared around a bend in the road. "Did you see how the older man stared at you, Bob? Do you suppose he remembers seeing you on the train?"

"Certainly not!" Bob openly scoffed at the suggestion. "They were stumped because they couldn't see my aunts, that's all. I only hope they forget to come around here until I've had a chance to warn my relatives—get that, Betty? My relatives sounds pretty good, doesn't it?—against their crooked ways. If they don't be-

lieve there is oil on this farm, I'll eat my hat. No client with a delicate daughter could explain their eagerness. I'll bet they've thoroughly prospected the fields before they even approached the house."

Betty could not share Bob's light-heartedness. The look in the older man's eyes as he studied Bob would persist in sticking in her mind, and she was unable to rid herself of the feeling that he would do the boy actual harm if a chance presented. What he hoped to gain by injuring Bob, Betty could not thoroughly understand, but added to her anxiety for her uncle and the responsibility she felt for the sick women, was now added a fear for Bob's safety. She tried to tell him something of this, but he laughed at her.

"If you have a vision of me kidnapped by the cruel sharpers," he teased her, "forget it. What were my voice and my two trusty arms and legs given me for? I can take care of myself and you, too, Betsey."

Nevertheless, Betty's tranquillity was sorely shaken, and though she gradually became calmer as the day wore on, she insisted on going out with Bob to do the chores at the barn that night, and extracted a promise from him that he would call her when he got up in the morning so that she might make the morning rounds with him. Luckily Miss Hope passed a quiet night, for if

she had called for her lost sister again it is difficult to say what the effect might have been on Betty's already tried nerves.

One of her anxieties was removed to some extent the next morning when Doctor Morrison came out in his car and brought her word that her uncle had telephoned the Watterbys and sent Betty a message.

"The connection was very faulty," said the doctor, "and Will Watterby says he doesn't believe he made your uncle understand where you and Bob were. But he made out that Mr. Gordon was safe and the fire slackening up a bit. He doesn't expect to be able to get away under a week. Of course work is demoralized, and he'll have his hands full."

Both Betty and Bob were overjoyed to learn that Uncle Dick was all right, and when the doctor pronounced both patients on the road to certain recovery, they were additionally cheered. They said nothing to the physician of their visitors of the day before, because Bob was unwilling to announce that he was a nephew of the Saunders. He wished them to hear it first.

"I think Miss Hope might sit up for a few minutes this afternoon," counseled the doctor on leaving. "Miss Charity might try that to-morrow. Of course, I'll be out again in the morning. You two youngsters are in my mind continually."

He drove away, and for the rest of the day Bob was left pretty much to his own devices, Betty, however, stipulating that he was to stay close to the house. She could not shake off her fear of the two men, and Bob was far too considerate to worry her deliberately when she had so much to attend to.

Miss Hope was delighted to sit up for half an hour, and now that her patients were stronger, Betty was put to it to keep them amused and contented in bed. The doctor's orders were strict that they were not to get up for at least two more days.

Betty read aloud to them, seated in the doorway between the two rooms so that both could hear; she gave them reports of the condition of things outside; and Miss Hope said primly that she would like to meet and thank the boy who had been so kind as soon as she could be "suitably attired." Betty was thankful that she did not ask his name, but the sisters were not at all curious. They had been so ill and were still weak, and the fact that their household and farm was apparently running smoothly was enough for them to grasp. The details did not claim their attention.

"Charity was sick first," said Miss Hope, over her beef tea and toast. "What delicious tea this is, my dear! Yes, she was down for two days,

and I took care of her and did the milking. Then I felt a cold coming on, but I crawled around for another day, doing the best I could. The night before the day you came I went out to milk and I must have fainted. When I came to I was within an inch of old Blossom's hoofs. That scared me, and I came right into the house without finishing a chore. I think I was delirious all night, and I remember thinking that if we were both going to die, at least I'd have things as orderly as possible. So I went around and pulled down all the first floor shades. Upstairs we always keep 'em drawn. And then I don't remember another thing till I came to and found you in the room."

"And she didn't come a minute too soon," croaked Miss Charity.

CHAPTER XIX

LOOKING BACKWARD

Doctor Morrison declared that it was due to Betty's skill in nursing more than to his drugs, but it is certain that, once started, the aunts gained steadily. In two or three days from the time they first sat up he pronounced it safe for them to be dressed, and while they were still a bit shaky, they took great delight in walking about the house.

Bob was introduced to them off-handedly one morning by the doctor, and though both old ladies started at his name, they said nothing. After the physician's car had gone, Miss Hope came out on to the back porch where Betty was peeling potatoes and Bob mending a loose floorboard.

"My sister and I——" stammered Miss Hope, "we were wondering if you were a neighbor's boy. We've seen so little of our neighbors these last few years, that we haven't kept track of the new families who have moved into the neighborhood. I don't recollect any Hendersons about here, do you, Sister?"

Miss Charity, who had followed her, shook her head.

Bob looked at Betty, and Betty looked helplessly at Bob. Now that the time had come they were afraid of the effect the news might have on the sisters. Bob, as he said afterward, "didn't know how to begin," and Betty wished fervently that her uncle could be there to help them out.

"A long time ago," said Miss Hope dreamily, "we knew a man named Henderson, David Henderson. He married our younger sister."

Caution deserted Bob, and, without intending to, he made his announcement.

"David Henderson was my father," he stated.

Miss Hope turned so white that Betty thought she would faint, and Miss Charity's mouth opened in speechless amazement.

"Then you are Faith's son," said Miss Hope slowly, clinging to the door for support. "Ever since Doctor Morrison introduced you, I wanted to stare at you, you looked so like the Saunders. Faith didn't—she was more like the Dixons, our mother's people. But you are Saunders through and through; isn't he, Charity?"

"He looks so much like you," quavered Miss Charity, "that I'd know in a minute he was related to us. But Faith—your mother—is she, did she——?"

"She died the night I was born," said Bob simply. "Almost fifteen years ago."

The sisters must have expected this; indeed, hope that their sister lived had probably deserted them years ago; and yet the confirmation was naturally something of a shock. They clung to each other for a moment, and then Miss Hope, rather to Bob's embarrassment, walked over to him and solemnly kissed him.

"My dear, dear nephew!" she murmured.

Then Miss Charity, more timidly, kissed him too, and presently they were all sitting down quietly on the porch, checking up the long years.

When Bob's tin box was finally opened, and the marriage certificate of his parents, the picture of his mother in her wedding gown, and a yellowed letter or two examined and cried over softly by the aunts, Miss Hope began to piece together the story of their lives since Bob's mother had left them. Bob and Betty had found Faith's photograph in the family album, but Miss Hope brought out the old Bible and showed them where her mother had made the entry of the marriage of his mother and father.

"They went away for a week for their wedding trip, and then came back to get a few things for housekeeping," said the old lady, patting Betty's hand where it lay in her lap. Bob was still looking over the Bible. "Then they said

they were going to Chicago, and they drove away one bright morning, eighteen years ago. And not one word did we ever hear from Faith, or from David, not one word. It killed father and mother, the anxiety and the suspense. They died within a week of each other and less than a year after Faith went. Charity and I always wanted to go to Chicago and hunt for 'em, but there was the expense. We had only this farm, and the interest took every cent we could rake together. How on earth we'll pay it this year is more than I can see."

"What do you think was the reason they didn't write?" urged Miss Charity, in her gentle old voice. "There were almost three years 'fore you came along. Why couldn't they write? I know David was good to Faith—he worshiped her. So that couldn't have been the reason. Bob, is your father dead, too?"

"I'll tell you, though perhaps I shouldn't," said Bob slowly. "If I give you pain, remember it is better to hear it from me than from a stranger, as you otherwise might. Aunt Hope—and Aunt Charity—I was born in the Gladden county poorhouse, in the East."

There was a gasp from Miss Hope, but Bob hurried on, pretending not to hear.

"My father, they think, was killed in a railroad wreck," he said. "At least there was a bad

wreck several miles from where they found my mother nearly crazed and with no baggage beyond this little tin box and the clothes she wore. Grief and exposure had driven her almost out of her mind, and in her ravings, they tell me, she talked continuously about 'the brakes' and 'that glaring headlight.' And then, toward the end, she spoke of her husband and said she couldn't wake him up to speak to her. There is small doubt in my mind but that he died in the wreck. Mother died the night I was born, and until I was ten I lived in the poorhouse. Then I was hired out to a farmer, and the third year on his place I met Betty, who came to spend the summer there. An old bookman, investigating a pile of old books and records at the poorhouse, found that Saunders was my mother's maiden name and he traced my relatives for me."

Bob briefly sketched his trip to Washington and his experiences there, and during the recital the aunts learned a great deal about Betty, too. Their first shock at hearing that their sister had died in the poorhouse gradually lessened, but they were still puzzled to account for the three years' silence that had preceded his birth.

"I'll tell you how I think it was," said Bob. "This is only conjecture, mind. I think my father wasn't successful in a business way, and he must have wanted to give my mother com-

forts and luxuries and a pleasant home. He probably kept thinking that in a few weeks things would be better, and insensibly he persuaded her to put off writing till she could ask you to come to see her. If she had lived after I was born, I am sure she would have written, whether my father prospered or not. But I imagine they were both proud."

"Faith was," assented Miss Hope. "Though dear knows, she needn't have hesitated to have written home for a little help. Father would have been glad to send her money, for he admired David and liked him. He was a fine looking young man, Bob, tall and slender and with such magnificent dark eyes. And Faith was a beautiful girl."

All the rest of that day the aunts kept recalling stories of Bob's mother, and in the attic, just as Betty had known there would be, they opened a trunk that was full of little keepsakes she had treasured as a girl.

Bob handled the things in the little square trunk very tenderly and reverently and tried to picture the young girl who had packed them away so carefully the week before her wedding.

"They're yours, Bob," said Miss Hope. "Faith was going to send for that trunk as soon as she was settled. Of course she never did. The farm will be yours, too, some day; in fact,

a third of it's yours now, or will be when you come of age. Father left it that way in his will—to us three daughters share and share alike, and you'll have Faith's share. Poor Father! He was sure that we'd hear from Faith, and he thought he'd left us all quite well off. But we had to put a mortgage on the farm about ten years ago, and every year it's harder and harder to get along. Charity and I are too old—that's the truth. And some stock Father left us we traded off for some paying eight per cent, and that company failed."

"You see," explained Miss Charity in her gentle way, "we don't know anything about business. That man wasn't honest who sold us the stock, but Hope and I thought he couldn't cheat us—he was a friend of Father's."

"Well, don't let any one swindle you again," said Bob, a trifle excitedly. "You don't have to worry about interest and taxes, any more, Aunts. You have a fortune right here in your own dooryard; or if not exactly out by the pump, then very near it!"

The sisters looked bewildered.

"Yes, yes," insisted Betty, as they gazed at her to see if Bob were in earnest. "The farm is worth thousands of dollars."

"Oil!" exploded Bob. "You can lease or sell outright, and there isn't the slightest doubt that

there's oil sand on the place. Betty's uncle will know. Uncle Dick is an expe t oil man."

Miss Hope shook her head.

"My dear nephew," she urged protestingly, "surely you must be mistaken. Sister and I have seen no evidences of oil. No one has ever mentioned the subject or the possibilities to us. There are no oil wells very near here. Don't you speak unadvisedly?"

"I should say not!" Bob was positive if not as precise as his aunt. "There's oil here, or all the wells in the fields are dry. The farm is a gold mine."

Betty rose hurriedly and pointed toward the window in alarm. They had been sitting in the parlor, and she faced the bar of late afternoon sunlight that lay on the floor.

"I saw the shadow of some one," she whispered in alarm. "It crossed that patch of sunlight. Bob, I am afraid!"

CHAPTER XX

BETTY IS STOPPED

"Doctor Morrison, maybe," said Bob carelessly. "Gee, Betty, you certainly are nervous! I'll run around the house and see if there's any one about."

He dashed out, and though he hunted thoroughly, reported that he could find no one.

"It wasn't the doctor, that's sure," he said. "And the grocer's boy would have gone to the back of the house. Are you sure you saw anything, Betty?"

"I saw a man's shadow," averred Betty positively. "I was sitting facing the window, you know, and watching the million little motes dancing in the shaft of light, when a shadow, full length, fell on the floor. It was for only a second, as though some one had stepped across the porch. Then I told you. Bob, I know I shan't sleep a wink to-night."

"Nonsense," said Bob stoutly. "Who could it have been? Goodness knows, there's nothing worth stealing in the house."

"Those sharpers," whispered Betty. "They

might have come back and be hanging around hoping they can make your aunts sell the farm to them."

"I'd like to see them try it," bristled Bob. "Isn't it funny, Betty, we can't make the aunts believe there is oil here? I think Aunt Charity might, but Aunt Hope is so positive she rides right over her. Well, I hope that Uncle Dick comes back from the fields mighty quick and persuades them that they have a fortune ready for the spending."

Despite Bob's assurances that he could find no one, Betty was uneasy, and she passed a restless night. The next day and the next passed without incident, save for a visit from Doctor Morrison in the late afternoon. He did not come every day now, and this call, he announced, was more in the nature of a social call. He had been told of Bob's relationship to the old ladies and was interested and pleased, for he had known them for as long as he had lived in that section. He carried the good news to Grandma Watterby, too, and that kind soul, as an expression of her pleasure, insisted on sending the aunts two of her best braided rugs.

"I have a note for you from your uncle, Betty," said the doctor, after he had delivered the rugs.

People often intrusted him with messages and

letters and packages, for his work took him everywhere. He had been to the oil fields and seen Mr. Gordon and had been able to give him a full account of Betty's and Bob's activities. In a postscript Mr. Gordon had added his congratulations and good wishes for "my nephew Bob." The body of the letter, addressed to Betty, praised her for her service to the aunts and said that the writer hoped to get back to the Watterbys within three or four days.

"I'll need a little rest by then," he went on to say, "for I've been in the machine night and day for longer than I care to think about. We're clearing away the débris of the fire, and drilling two new wells."

The doctor was persuaded to stay to supper, which was a meal to be remembered, for Miss Hope was a famous cook and she spared neither eggs nor butter, a liberality which the close-fisted Joseph Peabody would have blamed for her poverty.

There was no mistaking the strained financial circumstances of the two old women. Every day that Bob spent with them disclosed some new makeshift to avoid the expenditure of money, and both house and barns were sadly in need of repairs. Bob himself was able to do many little

odd jobs, a nail driven here, a bit of plastering there, that tended to make the premises more habitable, and he worked incessantly and gladly, determined that his aunts should never do another stroke of work outside the house.

They were normal in health again and Betty had suggested that she go back to the Watterbys. But they looked so stricken at the mention of such a plan, and seemed so genuinely anxious to have her stay, that she promised not to leave till her uncle came for her. Bob, too, was relieved by her decision, for his promise to Mr. Gordon still held good, and yet he felt that his place was with his aunts.

The shades all over the house were up now, and the four bedrooms on the second floor in use once more. They were sparsely furnished, like those downstairs, but everything was neat and clean. Miss Charity confided to Betty that she and her sister had been forced to sell their best furniture, some old-fashioned mahogany pieces included, to meet a note they had given to a neighbor. The two poor sisters seemed to have been the prey of unscrupulous sharpers since the death of their parents, and Betty fervently hoped that Bob would be able to stave off the pseudo real-estate men till her uncle could advise them.

A few days after the doctor's call Betty decided that what she needed was a good gallop

on Clover. She had had little time for riding since she had been nurse and housekeeper, and the little horse was becoming restive from too much confinement.

"A ride will do you good," declared Miss Hope, in her eager, positive fashion. "I suppose you'll stop in at Grandma Watterby's? Tell her Charity and I thank her very much for the rugs and for the beef-tea she sent us."

The road from the Saunders farm was the main highway to Flame City, and Bob, who in his capacity of guardian felt his responsibility keenly, saw no harm in Betty's riding it alone. It was morning, and she would have lunch with the Watterbys and come back in the early afternoon. Everything looked all right, and he bade her a cheerful good-bye.

"Isn't it great, Clover, to be out for fun?" Betty asked, as the horse snuffed the fresh air in great delight. "I guess you thought you were going to have to stay in the stable, or be turned out to grass like an old lady, for the rest of your life, didn't you?"

Clover snorted, and settled down into her favorite canter. Betty enjoyed the sense of motion and the rush of the wind, and horse and girl had a glorious hour before they drew rein at the Watterby gate.

"Well, bless her heart, did she come to see us

at last!" cried Grandma Watterby, hurrying down to greet her. "Emma!" she called. "Emma! Just see who's come to stay with us."

The old woman was greatly disappointed when Betty explained that she must go back after lunch, dinner, as the noon meal was made at the Watterby table, but the girl was not to be persuaded to stay over night. She had promised Bob.

Every one, from Grandma Watterby to the Prices, had an innocent curiosity, wholly friendly, to hear about Bob and his aunts, and Betty was glad to gratify it. She told the whole story, only omitting the portion that dealt with the death of Bob's mother in the poorhouse, rightly reasoning that the Misses Saunders would want to keep this fact from old neighbors and friends. The household rejoiced with Bob that he had found his kindred, and Grandma Watterby expressed the sentiments of all when she said that "Bob will take care of them two old women and be a prop to 'em for their remaining years."

Ki, the Indian, had the fox skin cured, and proudly showed it to Betty. She was delighted with the silky pelt and ran upstairs to put it in her trunk while Ki saddled Clover for the return trip. She knew that a good furrier would make her a stunning neck-piece for the winter from the fur.

It was slightly after half past one when Betty

started for the Saunders farm, and as the day was warm and the patches of shade few and far between, she let Clover take her own time. In a lonely stretch of road, out of sight of any house or building, two men stepped quietly from some bushes at the side of the road, and laid hands on Clover's bridle. Betty recognized them as the two men dressed in gray whom Bob had followed on the train, and who had interviewed him while the aunts were ill.

"Don't scream!" warned the man called Blosser. "We don't go to hurt you, and you'll be all right if you don't make trouble. All we want you to do is to answer a few questions."

Betty was trembling, more through nervousness than fright, though she was afraid, too. But she managed to stammer that if she could answer their questions, she would.

"That fresh kid we saw with you the other day, back at the Saunders farm," said Blosser, jerking his thumb in the general direction of the three hills. "Is he going to be there long?"

Betty did not know whether anything she might say would injure Bob or not, and she wisely concluded that the best plan would be to answer as truthfully as possible.

"I suppose he will live there," she said quietly. "He is their nephew, you know."

Fluss looked disgustedly at his companion.

"Can you beat that?" he demanded in an undertone. "The kid has to turn up just when he isn't wanted. The old ladies never had a nephew to my knowledge, and now they allow themselves to be imposed on by——"

A look from Blosser restrained him.

"Well," Fluss addressed himself to Betty, "do you know anything about how the farm was left? Where's the kid's mother? Disinherited? Was the place left to these old maids? It was, wasn't it?"

"What he means," interrupted Blosser, "is, do you know whether this boy would come in for any of the money if some one bought the farm? We've a client who would like to buy and farm it, as I was saying the other day."

"Bob is entitled to one-third," said Betty coolly, having in a measure recovered her composure.

"Oh, he is, is he?" snarled the older man. "I thought he had a good deal to say about the place. Did the old maids get well? Are they up and about?"

"Miss Hope and Miss Charity are much better," answered Betty, flushing indignantly. "And now will you let me go?"

"Not yet," grinned Fluss. "We haven't got this relation business all straightened out. What I want you to tell me——"

But Betty had seen the opportunity for which

she had been waiting. Fluss had removed his hand from the bridle for an instant, and Betty pulled back on the reins. Ki had taught Clover to rear at this signal and strike out with her forefeet. She obeyed beautifully, and involuntarily the two men fell back. Betty urged Clover ahead and they dashed down the road.

Betty forced her mount to gallop all the way home and startled Bob by dashing into the yard like a whirlwind. The horse was flecked with foam and Betty was white-faced and wild-eyed.

"Oh, Bob!" she gasped hysterically, tumbling from the saddle, "those sharpers are still here! They stopped me down the road!"

CHAPTER XXI

WHERE IS BOB?

BOB'S chief feeling, after hearing the story, was one of intense indignation.

"Pretty cheap, I call it," he growled, "to stop a girl and frighten her. The miserable cowards! Just let me get a crack at them once!"

"Bob Henderson, you stay right on this farm," cried Betty, her alarm returning. "They weren't trying to frighten me—at least, that wasn't their main purpose. They wanted to find out about you. They'll kidnap you, or do something dreadful to you. I wish with all my heart that Uncle Dick would come."

"Well, look here, Betty," argued Bob, impressed in spite of himself by her reasoning, "I'm pretty husky and I might have something to say if they tried to do away with me. Besides, what would be their object?"

Betty admitted that she did not know, unless, she added dismally, they planned to set the house on fire some night and burn up the whole family.

Bob laughed, and refused to consider this seriously. But for the next few days Betty dogged

his footsteps like the faithful friend she was, and though the boy found this trying at times he could not find it in his heart to protest.

Miss Hope and Miss Charity were very happy these days. For a while they forgot that the interest was due the next month, that no amount of patient figuring could show them how the year's taxes were to be met, and that the butter and egg money was their sole source of income. Instead, they gave themselves up to the enjoyment of having young folk in the quiet house and to the contemplation of Bob as their nephew. Faith had died, but she had left them a legacy—her son, who would be a prop to them in their old age.

Miss Hope and Miss Charity were talking things over one morning when Betty and Bob were out whitewashing the neglected hen house. Though the sisters protested, they insisted on doing some of the most pressing of the heavy tasks long neglected.

"I really do not see," said Miss Hope, "how we are to feed and clothe the child until he is old enough to earn his living. Of course Faith's son must have a good education. Betty tells me he is very anxious to go to school this winter. He is determined to get a job, but of course he is much too young to be self-supporting. If only we hadn't traded that stock!"

"Maybe what he says about the farm being worth a large sum of money is true," said Miss Charity timidly. "Wouldn't it be wonderful if there should be oil here, Sister?"

Miss Hope was a lady, and ladies do not snort, but she came perilously near to it.

"Humph!" she retorted, crushing her twin with a look. "I'm surprised at you, Charity! A woman of your age should have more strength of character than to believe in every fairy tale. Of course Bob and Betty think there is oil on the farm—they believe in rainbows and all the other pretty fancies that you and I have outgrown. Besides, I never did take much stock in this oil talk. I don't think the Lord would put a fortune into any one's hands so easily. It's a lazy man's idea of earning a living."

Miss Charity subsided without another reference to oil. Truth to tell, she did not believe in her heart of hearts that there was oil sand on the old farm, and she and her sister had been out of touch with the outside world so long that to a great extent they were ignorant of the proportions of the oil boom that had struck Flame City.

Bob had the stables in good order soon after his arrival, and a day or so before Mr. Gordon was expected he took it into his head to tinker up the cow stanchions. The two rather scrubby

cows were turned out into the near-by pasture, and Bob set valiantly to work.

Betty was helping the aunts in the kitchen that afternoon, and the three were surprised when Bob thrust a worried face in at the door and announced that the black and white cow had disappeared.

"I'm sure I pegged her down tightly," he explained. "That pasture fence is no good at all, and I never trusted to it. I pegged Blossom down with a good long rope, and Daisy, too; and Daisy is gone while Blossom is still eating her head off."

"I'll come and help you hunt," offered Betty. "The last pan of cookies is in the oven, isn't it, Aunt Hope? Wait till I wash my hands, Bob."

Betty now called Bob's aunts as he did, at their own request, and anyway, said Miss Hope, if Betty's uncle could be Bob's, too, why shouldn't she have two aunts as well as he?

"Where do you think she went?" questioned Betty, hurrying off with Bob. "Is the fence broken in any place?"

"One place it looks as though she might have stepped over," said Bob doubtfully. "The whole thing is so old and tottering that a good heavy cow could blow it down by breathing on it! There, see that corner? Daisy might have ambled through there."

"Then you go that way, and I'll work around the other end of the farm," suggested Betty. "In that way, we'll cover every inch. A cow is such a silly creature that you're sure to find her where you'd least expect to. The first one to come back will put one bar down so we'll know and go on up to the house."

Betty went off in one direction and Bob in another, and for a moment she heard his merry whistling. Then all was silent.

Betty, for a little while, enjoyed her search. She had had no time to explore the Saunders farm, and though much of it was of a deadly sameness, the three hills, whose shadows rested always on the fields, were beautiful to see, and the air was wonderfully bracing. Shy jack rabbits dodged back and forth between the bushes as Betty walked, and once, when she investigated a thicket that looked as though it might shelter the truant Daisy, the girl disturbed a guinea hen that flew out with a wild flapping of wings.

"I don't see where that cow can have gone," murmured Betty uneasily. "Bob is never careless, and I'm sure he must have pegged her down carefully. Losing one of the cows is serious, for the aunts count every pint of milk; they have to, poor dears. I wish to goodness they would admit that there might be oil on the farm. I'm sure it irritates Bob to be told so flatly that he is dreaming

day-dreams every time he happens to say a word about an oil well."

Betty searched painstakingly, even going out into the road and hunting a short stretch, lest the cow should have strayed out on the highway. The fields through which she tramped were woefully neglected, and more than once she barely saved herself from a turned ankle, for the land was uneven and dead leaves and weeds filled many a hole. Evidently there had been no systematic cultivation of the farm for a number of years.

The sun was low when Betty finally came out in the pasture lot. She glanced toward the bars, saw one down, and sighed with relief. Bob, then, had found the cow, or at least he was at home. She knew that the chances were he had brought Daisy with him, for Bob had the tenacity of a bulldog and would not easily abandon his hunt.

"Did Bob find her?" demanded Betty, bursting into the kitchen where Miss Hope and Miss Charity were setting the table for supper.

The aunts looked up, smiled at the flushed, eager face, and Miss Charity answered placidly.

"Bob hasn't come back, dearie," she said. "You know how boys are—he'll probably look under every stone for that miserable Daisy. She's a good cow, but to think she would run off!"

"Oh, he's back, I know he is," insisted Betty confidently. "I'll run out to the barn. I guess

he is going to do the chores before he comes in."

She thought it odd that Bob had not told his aunts of his return, but she was so sure that he was in the barn that she shouted his name as she entered the door. Clover whinnied, but no voice answered her. Blossom was in her stanchion, Bob had placed her there before setting out to hunt, and everything was just as he had left it, even to his hammer lying on the barn floor.

Betty went into the pig house, the chicken house and yard, and every outbuilding. No Bob was in sight.

"But he put the bar down—that was our signal," she said to herself, over and over.

"Don't fret, dearie. Sit down and eat your supper," counseled Miss Hope placidly, when she had to report that she could not find him. "He may be real late. I'll keep a plate hot for him."

The supper dishes were washed and dried, the table cleared, and a generous portion of biscuits and honey set aside for Bob. Miss Hope put on an old coat and went out with Betty to feed the stock, for it was growing dark and she did not want the boy to have it all to do when he came in tired.

"I'll do the milking," said Betty hurriedly. "I'm not much of a milker, but I guess I can manage. Bob hates to milk when it is dark."

In the girl's heart a definite fear was growing.

Something had happened to Bob! Milking, the thought of the sharpers came to her. Oddly enough they had not been in her mind for several days. The bar! Had they anything to do with the one bar being down?

Neither she nor Bob had ever said a word to his aunts on the subject of the two men in gray, arguing that there was no use in making the old ladies nervous. Now that the full responsibility had devolved upon Betty, she was firmly resolved to say no word concerning the men who had stopped her in the road and asked her questions about Bob.

She finished milking Blossom, and fastened the barn door behind her. Glancing toward the house, she saw Miss Hope come flying toward her, wringing her hands.

"Oh, Betty!" she wailed, "something has happened to Bob! I heard a cow low, and I went out front, and there Daisy stood on the lawn. I'm afraid Bob is lying somewhere with a broken leg!"

CHAPTER XXII

OFF FOR HELP

BETTY'S heart thumped, but she managed to control her voice. She was now convinced that the sharpers had something to do with Bob's disappearance.

Miss Hope was so beside herself with grief and fear that Betty thought, with the practical wisdom that was far beyond her years, that it would be better for her to occupy herself with searching than to remain in the house and let her imagination run riot.

Miss Charity came tremblingly out with a lantern, and after the milk was strained—for the habits of every day living hold even in times of trouble and distress—they set out, an old lady on either side of Betty, who had taken the lantern.

It was a weird performance, that tramp over the uneven fields with a flickering lantern throwing dim shadows before them and the bushes and trees assuming strange and terrifying shapes, fantastic beyond the power of clear daylight to make them. More than once Miss Charity started

back in fright, and Miss Hope, who was stronger, shook so with nervousness that she found it difficult to walk. Betty, too, was much overwrought, and it is probable that if either a jack rabbit or a white owl had crossed the path of the three there would have been instant flight. However, they saw nothing more alarming than their own shadows and a few harmless little insects that the glow of the lantern attracted.

"Suppose the poor, dear boy is lying somewhere with a broken leg!" Miss Hope kept repeating. "How would we get a doctor for him? Could we get him back to the house?"

"Think how selfish we were to sit down and eat supper—we ought to have known something was wrong with him," grieved Miss Charity. "I'd rather have lost both cows than have anything happen to Bob."

Betty could not share their fear that Bob was injured. The memory of that one bar down, haunted her, though she could give no explanation. Then the cow had come back. Betty had positive proof that the animal had not wandered to the half of the farm she had explored, and Bob's section had been nearer the house. Why had Daisy stayed away till almost dark, when milking time was at half past five? And the cow had been milked! Betty forebore to call the aunts' attention to this, and they were too en-

grossed in their own conjectures to have noticed the fact.

"Well, he isn't on the farm." Miss Hope made this reluctant admission after they had visited every nook and cranny. "What can have become of him?"

Miss Charity was almost in a state of collapse, and her sister and Betty both saw that she must be taken home. It was hard work, going back without Bob, and once in the kitchen, Miss Charity was hysterical, clinging to her sister and sobbing that first Faith had died and now her boy was missing.

"But we'll find him, dear," urged Miss Hope. "He can't be lost. A strong boy of fourteen can't be lost; can he, Betty?"

"Of course we'll find him," asserted Betty stoutly. "I'm going to ride to the Watterbys in the morning and telephone to Uncle Dick. He will know what to do. You won't mind staying alone for a couple of hours, will you?"

"Not in the daytime," quavered Miss Charity. "But my, I'm glad you're here to-night, Betty. Sister and I never used to be afraid, but you and Bob have spoiled us. We don't like to stay alone."

Betty slept very little that night. Aside from missing Bob's protection—and how much she had relied on him to take care of them she did not

realize until she missed him—there were the demands made on her by the old ladies, who both suffered from bad dreams. During much of the night Betty's active mind insisted on going over and over the most trivial points of the day. Always she came back to the two mysteries that she could not discuss with the aunts: Who had put the single bar down, and who had milked the cow?

Breakfast was a sorry pretense the next morning, and Betty was glad to hurry out to the barn and feed and water the stock and milk the two cows. It was hard and heavy work and she was not skilled at it, and so took twice as long a time as Bob usually did. Then, when she had saddled Clover and changed to her riding habit, she sighted the mail car down the road and waited to see if the carrier had brought her any later news of her uncle. The Watterbys promptly sent her any letters that came addressed to her there.

There was no news, but the delay was fifteen minutes or so, and when Betty finally started for the Watterbys it was after nine o'clock. She had no definite plan beyond telephoning to her uncle and imploring him to come and help them hunt for Bob.

"Where could he be?" mourned poor Miss Hope, with maddening persistency. "We looked all over the farm, and yet where could he be?

If he went to any of the neighbors to inquire, and was taken sick, he'd send us word. I don't see where he can be!"

Betty hurried Clover along, half-dreading another encounter with the men who had stopped her. She passed the place where she had been stopped, and a bit further on met Doctor Morrison on his way to a case, his car raising an enormous cloud of dust in the roadway. He pulled out to allow her room, recognized her, and waved a friendly hand as he raced by. By this token Betty knew he was in haste, for he always stopped to talk to her and ask after the Saunders sisters.

The Watterby place, when she reached it, seemed deserted. The hospitable front door was closed, and the shining array of milk pans on the back porch was the only evidence that some one had been at work that morning. No Grandma Watterby came smiling down to the gate, no busy Mrs. Will Watterby came to the window with her sleeves rolled high.

"Well, for pity's sake!" gasped Betty, completely astounded. "I never knew them to go off anywhere all at once. Never! Mrs. Watterby is always so busy. I wonder if anything has happened."

"Hello! Hello!" A shout from the roadway

made her turn. "You looking for Mr. Watterby?"

"I'm looking for any one of them," explained Betty, smiling at the tow-haired boy who stood grinning at her. "Are they all away?"

"Yep. They're out riding in an automobile," announced the boy importantly. "Grandma Watterby's great-nephew, up to Tippewa, died and left her two thousand dollars. And she says she always wanted a car, and now she's going to have one. A different agent has been here trying to sell her one every week. They took me last time."

In spite of her anxiety, Betty laughed at the picture she had of the hard-working family leaving their cares and toil to go riding about the country in a demonstrator's car. She hoped that Grandma would find a car to her liking, one whose springs would be kind to her rheumatic bones, and that there would be enough left of the little legacy to buy the valiant old lady some of the small luxuries she liked.

"Ki's home," volunteered the boy. "He's working 'way out in the cornfield. Want to see him? I'll call him for you."

"No thanks," said Betty, uncertain what to do next. "I don't suppose there's a telephone at your house, is there?" she asked, smiling.

The urchin shook his head quickly.

"No, we ain't got one," he replied. "Was

you wanting to use Mis' Watterby's? It's out of order. Been no good for two days. My ma had to go to Flame City yesterday to telephone my dad."

"I'll have to go to Flame City, too, I think," decided Betty. "I hope you'll take the next automobile ride," she added, mounting Clover.

"Gee, Grandma Watterby says if they buy a car I can have all the rides I want," grinned the towhead engagingly. "You bet I hope they buy!"

All her worry about Bob shut down on Betty again as she urged the horse toward the town. Suppose Uncle Dick were not within reach of the telephone! Suppose he were off on a long inspection trip!

Flame City had not improved, and though Betty could count her visits to it on the fingers of one hand, she thought it looked more unattractive than ever. The streets were dusty and not over clean, and were blocked with trucks and mule teams on their way to the fields with supplies. Here and there a slatternly woman idled at the door of a shop, but for the most part men stood about in groups or waited for trade in the dirty, dark little shops.

"I wonder where the best place to telephone is," said Betty to herself, shrinking from pushing her way through any of the crowds that

seemed to surround every doorway. "I'll ask them in the post-office."

The post-office was a yellow-painted building that leaned for support against a blue cigar store. Like the majority of shacks in the town, it boasted of only one story, and a long counter, whittled with the initials of those who had waited for their mail, was its chief adornment.

Betty hitched Clover outside and entered the door to find the postmaster rapidly thumbing over a bunch of letters while a tall man in a pepper-and-salt suit waited, his back to the room.

"Can you tell me where to find a public telephone?" asked Betty, and at the sound of her voice, the man turned.

"Betty!" he ejaculated. "My dear child, how glad I am to see you!"

Mr. Gordon took the package of mail the postmaster handed him and thrust it into his coat pocket.

"The old car is outside," he assured his niece. "Let's go out and begin to get acquainted again."

Betty, beyond a radiant smile and a furtive hug, had said nothing, and when Mr. Gordon saw her in the sunlight he scrutinized her sharply.

"Everything all right, Betty?" he demanded, keeping his voice low so that the loungers should not overhear. "I'd rather you didn't come over to town like this. And where is Bob?"

"Oh, Uncle Dick!" The words came with a rush. "That's why I'm here. Bob has disappeared! We can't find him anywhere, and I'm afraid those awful men have carried him off."

Mr. Gordon stared at her in astonishment. In a few words she managed to outline for him her fears and what had taken place the day before. Mr. Gordon had made up his mind as she talked.

"We'll leave Clover at the hotel stable. It won't kill her for a few hours," he observed. "You and I can make better time in the car, rickety as it is. Hop in, Betty, for we're going to find Bob. Not a doubt of it. It's all over but the shouting."

CHAPTER XXIII

SELLING THE FARM

"DON'T you think those sharpers carried off Bob?" urged Betty, bracing herself as the car dipped into a rut and out again.

"Every indication of it," agreed her uncle, swerving sharply to avoid a delivery car.

"But where could they have taken him?" speculated Betty, clinging to the rim of the side door. "How will you know where to look?"

"I think he is right on the farm," answered Mr. Gordon. "In fact, I shall be very much surprised if we have to go off the place to discover him. I'm heading for the farm on that supposition."

"But, Uncle Dick," Betty raised her voice, for the much-abused car could not run silently, "I can't see why they would carry Bob off, anyway. Of course I know they don't like him, and I do believe they recognized him as the boy who sat behind them on the train, though Bob laughs and says he isn't so handsome that people remember his face; but I don't understand what good it would do them to kidnap him. The aunts are too

poor to pay any money for him, that's certain."

"Well, now, Betty, I'm rather surprised at you," Mr. Gordon teased her. "For a bright girl, you seem to have been slow on this point. What do these sharpers want of the aunts, anyway?"

"The farm," answered Betty promptly. "They know there is oil there and they want to buy it for almost nothing and make their fortunes."

"At the expense of two innocent old ladies," added Mr. Gordon.

"But, Uncle Dick, Bob doesn't own the farm. Only his mother's share. And the aunts would be his guardians, he says, so his consent isn't necessary for a sale. You see, I do know a lot about business." And Betty glanced triumphantly at her uncle.

He smiled good-humoredly, and let the car out another notch.

"Has it ever occurred to you, my dear," he said casually, "that, if Bob were out of the way, the aunts might be persuaded to sell their farm for an absurdly small sum? A convincing talker might make any argument seem plausible, and neither Miss Hope nor Miss Charity are business women. They are utterly unversed in business methods or terms, and are the type of women who obediently sign any paper without reading it. I intend to see that you grow up with a knowl-

edge of legal terms and forms that will at least protect you when you're placed in the position the Saunders women are."

"Miss Hope said once her father attended to everything for them," mused Betty, "and I suppose when he died they just had to guess. Oh!" a sudden light seemed to break over her. "Oh, Uncle Dick! do you suppose those men may be there now trying to get them to sell the farm?"

"Of course I don't know that they were on the place when you left," said her uncle. "But allowing them half an hour to reach there, I am reasonably certain that they are sitting in the parlor this minute, talking to the aunts. I only hope they haven't an agreement with them, or, if they have, that the pen and ink is where Miss Hope can't put her hands on it."

"Do you think there really is oil there?" asked Betty hurriedly, for another turn would bring them in sight of the farm. "Can you tell for sure, Uncle Dick?"

Mr. Gordon regarded her whimsically.

"Oil wells are seldom 'sure,' " he replied cautiously. "But if I had my doubts, they'd be clinched by what you tell me of these men. No Easterner with a delicate daughter was ever so anxious to buy a run-down place—not with a whole county to chose from. Also, as far as I can tell, judging from the location, which is all

I've had to go by, I should say we were safe in saying there is oil sand there. In fact, I've already taken it up with the company, Betty, and they're inclined to think this whole section may be a find."

Betty hardly waited for the automobile to stop before she was out and up the front steps of the farm house, Mr. Gordon close behind her.

"I hear voices in the parlor," whispered Betty, "Oh, hurry!"

"All cash, you see," a voice that Betty recognized as Blosser's was saying persuasively. "Nothing to wait for, absolutely no delay."

Mr. Gordon put a restraining hand on Betty's arm, and motioned to her to keep still.

"But my sister and I should like to talk it over, for a day or so," quavered Miss Hope. "We're upset because our nephew is missing, as we have explained, and I don't think we should decide hastily."

"I don't like to hurry you," struck in another voice, Fluss's, Betty was sure, "but I tell you frankly, Madam, a cash offer doesn't require consideration. All you have to do, you and your sister, is to sign this paper, and we'll count the money right into your hand. Could anything be fairer?"

"It's a big offer, too," said Blosser. "A run-down place like this isn't attractive, and you're

likely to go years before you get another bid. Our client wants to get his daughter out into this air, and he has money to spend fixing up. I tell you what we'll do—we'll pay this year's taxes—include them in the sale price. Why, ladies, you'll have a thousand dollars in cash!"

Betty could picture Miss Hope's eyes at the thought of a thousand dollars.

"Well, Sister, perhaps we had better take it," suggested Miss Charity timidly. "We can do sewing or something like that, and that money will put Bob through school."

"Come on, here's where we put a spoke in the wheel," whispered Mr. Gordon, beckoning Betty to follow him and striding down the hall.

"Why, Betty!" Miss Hope rose hastily and kissed her. "Sister and I had begun to worry about you."

"This is my uncle, Mr. Gordon, Miss Hope," said Betty. "I found him in Flame City. Has Bob come back?"

Miss Hope, much flustered by the presence of another stranger, said that Bob had not returned, and presented Mr. Gordon to her sister.

"These gentlemen, Mr. Snead and Mr. Elmer,"—she consulted the cards in her hand—"have called to see us about selling our farm."

Mr. Gordon nodded curtly to the pair whose

faces were as black as a thunder-cloud at the interruption.

"I'm sure Mr. Gordon will excuse us if we go on with the business," said Blosser smoothly. "You have a dining-room, perhaps, or some other room where we could finish this matter quietly?"

Miss Hope glanced about her helplessly. Betty noticed that there was pen and ink and a package of bills of large denomination on the table. Evidently they had reached the farm just in time.

"Why, it happens that I'm interested in a way in your farm, if it is for sale," announced Mr. Gordon leisurely.

He selected a comfortable chair, and leaned back in it with the air of a man who is not to be hurried. A look of relief came into Miss Hope's face, and her nervous tension perceptibly relaxed.

"This farm *is* sold," declared Blosser truculently. "My partner and I have bought it for a client of ours."

"Any signatures passed?" said Mr. Gordon lazily.

"Miss Hope will sign right here," said Blosser, hastily unfolding a sheet of foolscap. "She was about to do so when you came in."

Miss Hope automatically took up the pen.

"Have you read that agreement?" demanded Mr. Gordon sharply. "Do you know what you

are signing? I'd like to know the purchase price. I'm representing Bob's interest."

"Oh, Bob!" Miss Hope and Miss Charity both turned from the paper toward the speaker. "We think the money will put Bob through school—a whole thousand dollars, Mr. Gordon, and the taxes paid. We can't run the farm any longer. We can't afford to hire help."

"No farm is sold without a little more trouble than this," announced Mr. Gordon pleasantly. "You don't mind if I ask you a few questions?"

"We're in a hurry," broke in Fluss. "Sign this, ladies, and my partner and I will pay you the cash and get on to the next town. You can answer this gentleman's questions after we're gone."

"I suppose there is a mortgage?" asked Mr. Gordon, ignoring Fluss altogether.

"Five hundred dollars," answered Miss Hope. "We had to give a mortgage to get along after Father died."

"So they've offered you fifteen hundred dollars for an oil farm," said Mr. Gordon contemptuously. "Well, don't take it."

"Bob said there was oil here!" cried Miss Charity.

"That's a lie!" snarled Blosser furiously. "You're out of the oil section by a good many miles. Are you going to turn down a cash offer for this forsaken dump, simply because a stranger

happens along and tells you there may be oil on it? Bah!"

"Keep your temper," counseled Fluss in a low tone. "Well, rather than see two ladies lose a sale," he said with forced cheerfulness, "we will make you an offer of three thousand dollars. Money talks louder than fair words."

"I'll give you five thousand, cash," Mr. Gordon spoke quietly, but Betty bounced about on the sofa in delight.

Fluss leaped to his feet and brought his fist smashing down on the table.

"Six thousand!" he cried fiercely. "We're buying this farm. We'll give you six thousand dollars, ladies."

"Seven thousand," said Mr. Gordon conversationally. He did not shift his position, but his keen eyes followed every movement of the rascally pair. He said afterward that he was afraid of gun play.

"Oh—oh, my goodness!" stammered Miss Hope. "I can't seem to think."

"You don't have to, Madam," Fluss assured her, his immaculate gray tie under one ear and his clothing rumpled from the heat and excitement. "Sell us your farm. We'll give you ten thousand dollars. That's the last word. Ten thousand for this mud hole. Here's a pen—sign this!"

"Drop that pen!" thundered Mr. Gordon, and Miss Hope let it fall as though it had burned her fingers. "I'll give you fifteen thousand dollars," he said more gently.

Fluss looked at Blosser who nodded.

"Seventeen thousand," he shrieked, as though the sisters were deaf. "Seventeen I tell you, seventeen thousand!"

"Twenty," said Mr. Gordon cheerfully.

Miss Charity suddenly found her voice.

"I think we'd better sell to Mr. Gordon," she announced quietly.

CHAPTER XXIV

UNCLE DICK'S BUYER

Miss Hope, who had been wringing her hands, bewildered and hopelessly at sea, hailed this concrete suggestion with visible relief.

"All right, Sister, I think so, too," she agreed, glad for once not to have to make the decision. "You're sure you are not cheating yourself, Mr. Gordon, by paying us twenty thousand dollars?"

Mr. Gordon, who had strolled over to the door leading into the hall, assured her that he was well-satisfied with his bargain.

"Well, we'll be going," muttered Blosser. "All this comes from trying to do business with women. You had as good as passed us your word that you'd sell to us, and see what's happened. However, women don't know nothing about ethics. Come on, Fluss."

He was too disappointed and angry to notice the slip of his tongue, but Fluss flushed a brick red.

"Just one minute," said Mr. Richard Gordon, blocking the doorway. "You don't leave this place until you promise to produce that boy."

Blosser feigned ignorance, but the attempt deceived no one.

"What boy?" he blustered. "You seem bent on stirring up trouble, Stranger."

"You know very well what boy," retorted Mr. Gordon evenly. "You'll stir up something more than mere trouble if he isn't brought here within a few minutes, or information given where we may find him. Where is Bob Henderson?"

"Here, sir!" a blithe voice announced, and the door leading into a communicating room was jerked open.

Bob, his clothing a bit the worse for wear, but apparently sound and whole, stood there, brandishing a stout club.

"Oh, Bob!" Betty's cry quite drowned the exclamation of the aunts, but Bob had no eye for any one but Blosser and Fluss, who were making a wild attempt to get past Mr. Gordon.

"Have they bought the farm?" demanded the boy excitedly. "Did they get my aunts to sign anything for them?"

"I'm your new landlord, Bob," announced Mr. Gordon, patting himself on the chest. "Don't think you can put me off when the rent comes due."

"So that's all right," said Bob, with manifest relief. "As for those two scamps, who nearly choked me, well, let me get at them once."

Whirling his club he charged upon the pair who

squealed in terror and tore past Mr. Gordon, down the hall and out into the yard, Bob in pursuit. Miss Hope and Miss Charity ran to the windows, and Betty and her uncle watched from the porch (Betty was going to follow Bob as a matter of course, but Mr. Gordon held her back) as the boy continued the chase. Fluss and Blosser presented a ludicrous sight as they ran heavily, their coats flapping in the wind and their hats jammed low over their eyes. Bob did not try to catch up with them, but contented himself with shouting loudly and swishing his heavy club through the air, while he kept just close enough to their heels to warn them that it was not safe to slacken speed. In a few minutes the watchers saw him coming back, walking, a broad grin on his face.

"Good little Marathon, wasn't it?" he called from the road. "Did you hear me yelling like an Indian? I chased them as far as the boundary line, and when I saw them they were still running. Gee, Mr. Gordon, I mean Uncle Dick, you got back from the oil fields just in time."

He came up on the steps and shook hands with Mr. Gordon, and submitted to a hug from each aunt.

"Have you really bought the farm?" he asked curiously. "Or was that just a blind?"

Miss Hope and Miss Charity looked anxiously

at Mr. Gordon. They had planned exactly what to do with that twenty thousand dollars.

"We haven't signed an agreement," admitted the successful bidder, "but the farm is sold, all right. I'll give this check to Miss Hope now—" he hastily filled out a blank slip from his book—"as an evidence of good faith. Then I want to hear Bob's tale, and then I must do a bit of telephoning. And to-morrow morning, good people, I promise you the surprise of your lives."

Miss Hope glanced at the check he gave her, gasped, and opened her mouth to speak.

"Sh!" warned Mr. Gordon. "Dear lady, I've set my heart on staging a little climax; don't spoil it. To-morrow morning at eleven o'clock we'll have all the explanations. Now, Bob, what happened to you? I hear you nearly frightened your aunts into hysterics, to say nothing of Betty, whom I found tearing around Flame City hunting for a telephone."

Bob was in a fever of curiosity to know about the farm, whether Mr. Gordon thought there was a good prospect of oil or not, but Uncle Dick was not the kind of man to have his decisions debated. Bob wisely concluded to wait with what patience he could until the proper time. He turned to Betty.

"You know when we separated to hunt for Daisy?" he said. "Well, I went through the first

field all right, but when I was passing those two old apple trees that have grown together, Fluss and Blosser jumped out and one of 'em threw a coat over my head so I couldn't shout. They downed me, and then Fluss stuffed his handkerchief in my mouth while Blosser tied my hands and feet. Daisy was behind the tree. I figured out they had come and got her, and I was mighty glad we had agreed to separate. I don't doubt they would have bound and gagged you, too, Betty, if you had been with me. They wouldn't stop at anything.

"They carried me to the barn loft——" Betty jumped a little. "Yes, I was up there when you were milking. Awfully hot up there in the hay it was, too. They were hiding near us when we planned to drop the bar as a signal, and I heard them laughing over that trick half the night. They slept up there with me—I was nearly dead for a drink of water—and once during the night Fluss did go down to the pump and bring me a drink, standing over me with that big club in case I should cry out when they took out the gag.

"This morning they watched and saw you ride off on Clover. They were in a panic for fear you would come back with some one before they could persuade the aunts to sell. I wish you could have seen them brushing each other off and shining their shoes on a horse blanket. They wanted

to look stylish and as though they had just come from town instead of sleeping in a hayloft all night."

"They said they had stayed in Flame City over night," said Miss Hope indignantly. "The idea!"

"They had several," grinned Bob. "I certainly put in an anxious hour up there after they had gone down the ladder. You see, I didn't know Betty was going for Uncle Dick, and I didn't know that any one else would say there was oil on the place. Fluss had a roll of bills as big as your arm, and I pictured him flashing that and Aunt Hope so anxious to send me to school that she wouldn't leave a margin for herself and Aunt Charity to live on. If I had known that Uncle Dick was coming, I'd have saved myself a heap of worry."

"If I had had to telephone to him, it would have been too late," said Betty. "I just happened to find him in the post-office; didn't I, Uncle Dick?"

"I'd just got back from the fields and was after mail," Mr. Gordon explained. "I meant to stop and get directions from the Watterbys how to find the Saunders farm. Well, as it happened, everything was planned for the best."

"How did you get down from the loft, Bob?" Betty asked curiously.

"Cut the string that tied my wrists on a rusty

scythe I found as I was crawling over the floor," said Bob. "Then, of course, I could pull out that nasty gag and untie my feet. I was a bit stiff at first, and I guess I fell down the hay loft ladder, but I was in such a hurry I'm not sure. The sharpers had left their club, and I brought that along for good luck. And, Aunt Hope, I'm starving to death!"

"Bless your heart, of course you are!" And Miss Hope hurried out to the kitchen, tucking Mr. Gordon's check into her apron pocket as she went. "I'll stir up some waffles, I think," she murmured, reaching for the egg bowl.

Mr. Gordon would not stay for dinner, for he was anxious, he said, to get to a telephone. He would spend the night with the Watterbys and be back the next morning with "an important some one."

"I'm so excited I can't walk straight," declared Betty, skipping between table and stove in an effort to help Aunt Hope with the dinner. "Goodness, it seems forever till to-morrow morning!"

Miss Hope and Miss Charity went about the rest of the day in a daze, and Bob and Betty, who could not settle down to any task, went out to the barn and enacted the scene of Bob's imprisonment all over again.

They were up at daybreak the next morning, and Miss Hope insisted on dusting and sweeping

the whole house, though, as Bob said, it was hardly likely that their visitors would insist on seeing the attic.

"It isn't the house Mr. Gordon is interested in," the boy maintained sagaciously. "There's oil here, Aunt Hope," and this time Miss Hope did not contradict him.

At ten minutes to eleven Mr. Gordon drove up with a small, sandy-haired man who wore large horn-rimmed spectacles. He was introduced to Miss Hope and her sister as Mr. Lindley Vernet, and then the four went into the parlor and closed the door.

"Children not wanted," said Mr. Gordon, grinning over his shoulder at Bob and Betty, left sitting on the porch.

"Children!" snorted Betty, shaking an indignant fist in pretended anger. "If it hadn't been for us, or rather for you, Bob, this farm would have been sold for next to nothing."

"If it hadn't been for you, you mean," retorted Bob. "Who was it went and brought back Uncle Dick? I might have shouted myself hoarse, but those rascals would have beaten me somehow. Do you suppose this Mr. Vernet is going to buy the place?"

"I think he is the head of Uncle Dick's firm," said Betty cautiously. "At least I've heard him speak of a Lindley Vernet. But I thought Uncle

Dick offered a lot of money, didn't you, Bob? How many acres are there?"

"Ninety," announced Bob briefly. "What's that? The door opened, so they must be through. No, it's only Aunt Charity."

But such a transformed Miss Charity! Her gentle dark eyes were shining, her cheeks were faintly pink, and she smiled at Betty and Bob as though something wonderful had happened.

"I came out to tell you," she said mysteriously, sitting down on the top step between them and putting an arm around each. "The farm is sold, my darlings. Can you guess for how much?"

"More than twenty thousand?" asked Betty. "Oh—twenty-five?"

"Thirty?" hazarded Bob, seeing that Betty had not guessed it.

Miss Charity laughed excitedly and hugged them with all her frail strength.

"Mr. Vernet is going to pay us ninety thousand dollars!"

CHAPTER XXV

HAPPY DAYS

"NINETY thousand dollars!" repeated Bob incredulously. "Why, that is a thousand dollars an acre!"

"He is sure they will drill many paying wells," said Miss Charity. "To think that this fortune should come in our old age! You can go to school and college, Bob, and Sister and I will never be a burden on you. Isn't it just wonderful!"

She went off into a happy little day-dream, and presently the conference broke up, and Miss Hope and the two men came out on the porch. Mr. Vernet proved to be a jolly kind of person, intensely interested in oil and oil prospects, and evidently completely satisfied with his purchase.

"Here's the young man I have to thank," he commented, shaking hands with Bob. "If those sharpers had got hold of the place, they would have forced me to buy at more than a fair risk, or else sold the land in small holdings and we should have had that abomination, close drilling.

I'm grateful to you, my lad, for outwitting those slick schemers."

Miss Hope persuaded the two men to stay to dinner, and she and Miss Charity fairly outdid themselves in their cooking. Afterward Mr. Gordon took Mr. Vernet back to the oil fields, depositing in the Flame City bank for Miss Hope the check for twenty-five thousand dollars he had given her the day before, and the larger check she had received that morning.

"We're rich, Sister, rich!" said Miss Charity, drying the dinner dishes and so overcome that she dropped a china cup which crashed into tiny pieces on the floor.

"Well, don't break all the dishes," advised Miss Hope, with dry practicality. "You can't buy a pretty cup in Flame City if you are a millionaire."

Bob's head was full of plans for his education, and in the days that followed he often spoke of his future. Mr. Gordon listened and advised him frequently, and Bob grew fonder of him all the time.

Clover was brought back from the Flame City stable where Betty had left her, and they resumed their riding, Mr. Gordon hiring a horse and often accompanying them.

"You know, the aunts have never seen the oil fields," said Betty one day, as they were slowly riding home from the fields where they had seen

the largest new well in operation for the first time. "Don't you think they would be interested, especially as their own farm will be an oil field next year?"

"We'll take them on a sightseeing trip," promised Mr. Gordon instantly. "If I can get a comfortable car, I'll come for you all to-morrow morning. They'll enjoy having dinner at the bunk house, and we'll show them the workings of the whole place. Imagine a person who has lived in this oil country and hasn't seen a well!"

The program was carried out, and the Misses Saunders thoroughly enjoyed the long day spent among the wells. They thought the machinery wonderful, as indeed it was, and marveled at the miles of pipe line.

Grandma Watterby, as might be expected, was delighted with the turn of events, and Betty and Bob spent a day with her, telling her all that had happened.

"It's better than a book," she sighed contentedly. "If Emma would only go around more, I'm sure she could find interesting things to tell me. 'Fore I was crippled with rheumatism, I used to know all that was goin' on."

The Watterbys had bought a car, and Bob was eager for his aunts to have one. They preferred to wait until it was decided where they

were to spend the winter, and in this Mr. Gordon concurred. He had been made, at the request of the two old ladies and backed by the old country lawyer who had known their father, the guardian of Bob, who would not inherit his share of the ninety thousand dollars, of course, until he was twenty-one. Bob himself was very much pleased to be a ward of Betty's uncle, feeling that now he "really belonged," as he happily said.

"Who do you suppose this is from?" asked Betty, waving a letter at Bob one morning not long after their visit to the oil fields with the aunts. "You'll never guess!"

Bob looked up from his book. He was luxuriously stretched under a tree, reading.

"From Bobby Littell?" he ventured.

"Bob Henderson, can you read the postmark from where you are?" Betty looked disappointed for a moment. "Oh, well, I might have known you would have guessed it. It is from Bobby. Want to hear a little bit?"

"I don't mind," conceded Bob graciously, keeping a finger in his book.

"She says they've been to Atlantic City for a month," explained Betty. "That is, Bobby, Esther, Louise and Mrs. Littell. Mr. Littell could spend only a week with them. And now the girls are going to boarding school. Listen.

" 'Louise and I are going away to school this fall, and though Esther is crazy to go, too, Dad says he must have one of us at home, so I think she will have to wait a year or two. Louise and I have been to Miss Graham's for three years, and I don't see why it isn't good enough for Esther till she is as old as we are. But you know she always wants to do everything we do. Oh, Betty, wouldn't it be too lovely for words if you should come to boarding school with us? Please ask your uncle, do. You can't spend the winter in Oklahoma, can you? And if you are going to school I know you would like the one we're going to. It is so highly recommended, and Mother personally knows the principal. I tell you—I'll see that a catalogue is sent to you, and you show it to your uncle. Libbie thinks maybe she will go.'

"And she winds up by saying that her father and mother send their love, and they all want to know how you are and if you found your aunts," concluded Betty, folding the letter. "I must write to Bobby and tell her your good luck."

"Do you want to go to boarding school?" asked Bob. "Where is this place she's so crazy about—in Washington?"

"I don't know just where, but I don't think it is very near Washington," answered Betty care-

lessly. "Of course I'd love to go to boarding school. Do you suppose Uncle Dick would be willing?"

Mr. Gordon, when consulted, promised to "think it over," and as Betty knew that none of his plans for the next few weeks were definitely settled and that the Littell girls would not go off to school before the middle of October, she was content to wait.

"Your education and Bob's are matters for serious thought," he told them more than once. "In some ways I think you are further advanced than most girls and boys of your age, but in other branches you will have to work hard to make up, Bob especially, for rather desultory training. I'll have a long talk with you both just as soon as I get some business matters straightened out."

So Bob and Betty put the school question aside for serious discussion, and proceeded to enjoy the days that followed. If any one is interested to know whether Betty did go to boarding school with the Littell girls and how Bob went about getting the education so long unfairly denied him, the answer may be found in the next volume of this series.

Mr. Gordon was still obliged to be away for several days at a time, and Betty and Bob continued to stay with Bob's aunts. They made very little change in their mode of living, Miss Hope

remarking that she "never was one to spend money; she liked to know it was in the bank, in case of need, but the older I get, the less I want." As for help, there was none to be had for any amount of money, so Bob took care of the live stock till it should be sold. The oil company was to take over the farm the first of October.

"What a perfectly grand time we have had after all," remarked Betty to Bob one day, after a ride into the country.

"Yes, everything seems to be coming our way," said the boy, with satisfaction. "Gee, I never dreamed I'd be so rich!"

"Oh, you'll be richer some day, Bob. And wiser, too. Now you've got the chance for an education I hope to see you a great lawyer or a doctor or an engineer—or something or other like that," and Betty gazed at him hopefully.

"All right, Betty," he answered promptly. "If you say so, it goes—so there!"

And here let us leave Betty Gordon and say good-bye.

THE END

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